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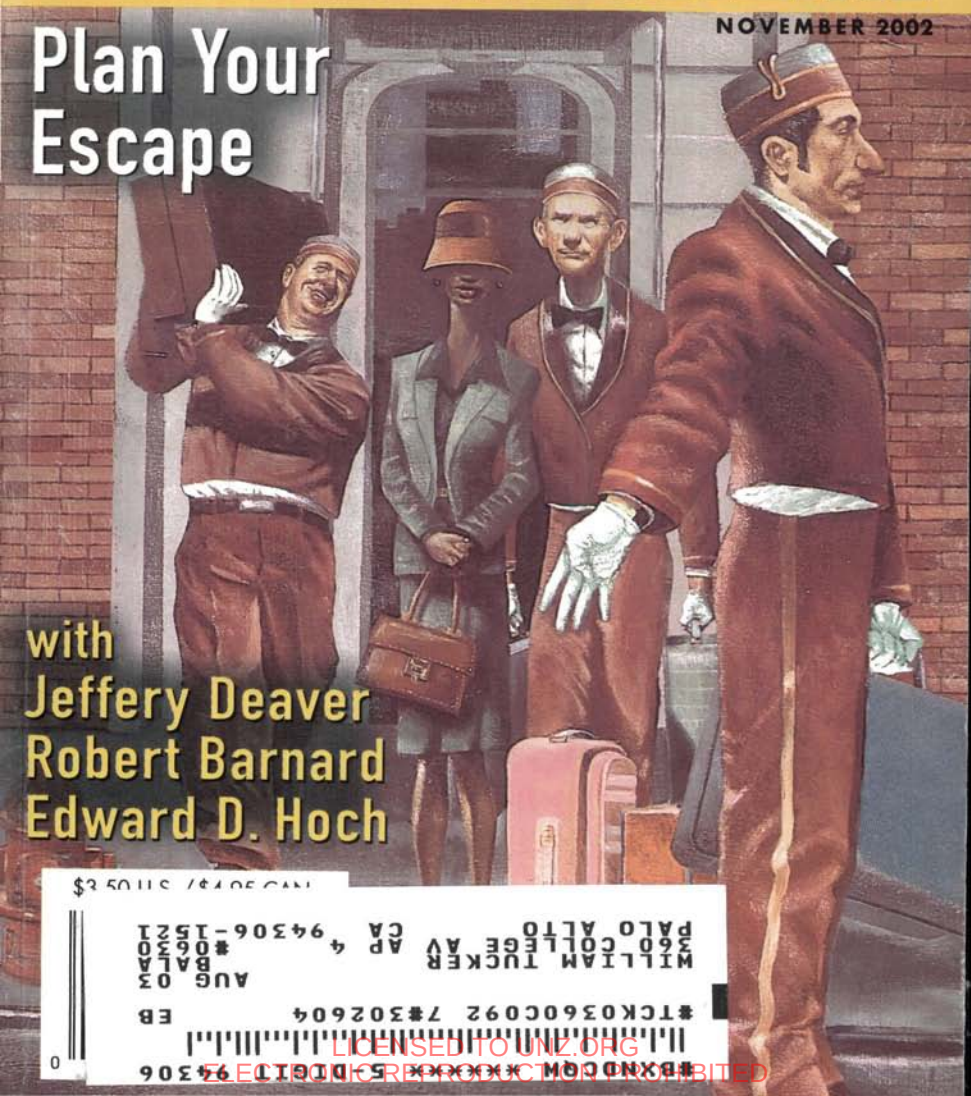

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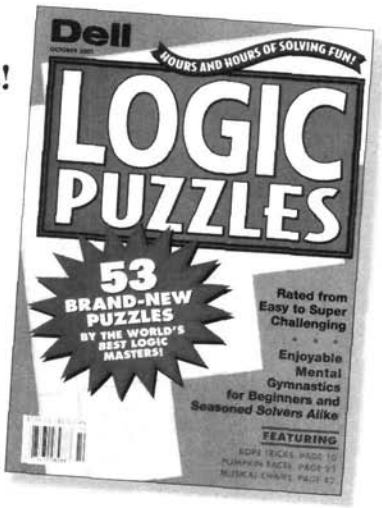
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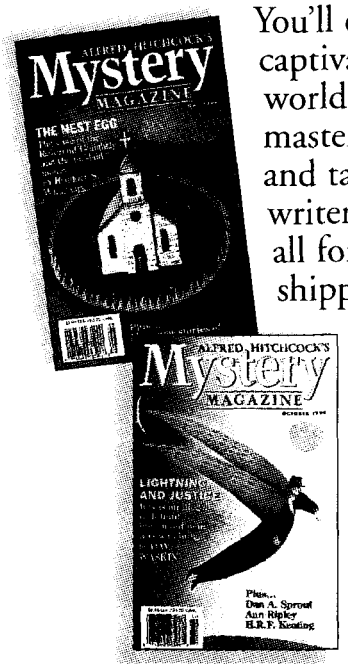

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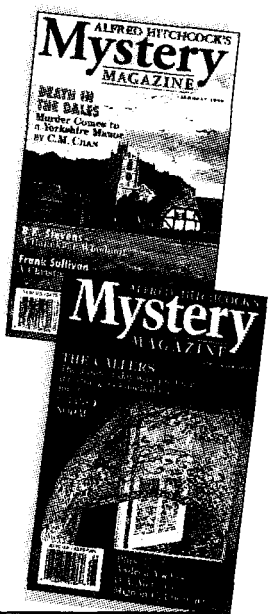

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Art by June Levine

WITHOUT JONATHAN

by Jeffery Deaver

Marissa Cooper turned her car onto Route 232, which would take her from Portsmouth to Green Harbor, twenty miles away.

Thinking: This was the same road that she and Jonathan had taken to and from the mall a thousand times, carting back necessities, silly luxuries, and occasional treasures.

The road off which they'd found their dream house when they'd moved to Maine seven years ago.

The road they'd taken to go to their anniversary celebration last May.

Tonight, though, all those memories led to one place: her life without Jonathan.

The setting sun behind her, she steered through the lazy turns, hoping to lose her difficult—but tenacious—thoughts.

Forget them! Look around you, she ordered herself. Look at the beautiful scenery: the slabs of purple clouds hanging over the maple and oak leaves—some gold, some red as a heart.

Look at the sunlight, a glowing ribbon draped along the dark

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pelt of hemlock and pine. At the absurd line of cows, walking single file in their spontaneous day-end commute back to the barn.

At the stately white spires of a small village tucked five miles off the highway.

And look at you: a thirty-four-year-old woman in a spritely silver Toyota, driving fast, toward a new life.

A life without Jonathan.

Twenty minutes later she came to Dannerville and braked for the first of the town's two stoplights. As her car idled, clutch in, she glanced to her right. Her heart did a little thud at what she saw.

A recent *Kirkus* review of Jeffery Deaver's 2002 novel *The Stone Monkey* refers to the author's "skill in . . . springing surprises long after a less inventive plotter would have thrown in the towel." He is so good at springing surprises at short story length that his literary agent has dubbed him "the O. Henry of the mystery story." We hope you'll be taken off guard by the twist in this one. ✝

In a store that sold boating and fishing gear was an ad for some kind of marine engine treatment. In this part of coastal Maine you couldn't avoid boats. They were everywhere: in overpriced tourist paintings and photos, on mugs, T-shirts, and key chains. And, of course, there were thousands of the real things everywhere: in the water, on trailers, in dry docks, and sitting on blocks in front yards—the New England version of immobilized pickups and cars in the rural South.

But what had hit home about the boat pictured in the ad she was now looking at was that it was a Chris-Craft. A big one, maybe thirty-six or thirty-eight feet.

Just like Jonathan's boat. Nearly identical, in fact: the same colors, same configuration, everything.

He'd bought his five years ago, and though Marissa thought his interest in it would flag (like any boy with a new toy), he'd proved her wrong and spent nearly every weekend on the vessel, cruising up and down the coast, fishing like an old cod deck hand. Her husband would bring home to Marissa the best of his catch, which she would clean and cook up.

Ah, Jonathan . . .

She swallowed hard and inhaled slowly to calm her pounding heart. She—

A honk behind her. The light had changed to green. She drove on, trying desperately to keep her mind from speculating about his death: The Chris-Craft rocking unsteadily in the turbulent gray Atlantic. Jonathan overboard. His arms perhaps flailing madly, his panicked voice perhaps crying for help as he was

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tugged downward in water so cold that it was a macabre race to see which killed you first: shock or drowning.

Oh, Jonathan . . .

Marissa cruised through Dannerville's second light and continued toward the coast. In front of her she could see, in the last of the sunlight, the skirt of the Atlantic, all that cold, deadly water.

The water responsible for life without Jonathan.

Then she told herself, no. Think about Peter instead.

Peter O'Banion, the man she was about to have dinner with in Green Harbor this Saturday night.

She'd met him through an ad in a magazine. They'd spoken on the phone a few times, and after considerable waltzing around on both their parts, she'd felt comfortable enough to suggest meeting in person. They'd settled on the Fishery, a popular restaurant on the wharf.

Peter had suggested Oceanside, which had better food, yes, but was also the place where Marissa'd gone with Jonathan on that anniversary dinner last May; she couldn't bring herself to meet Peter there.

So the Fishery it was.

She thought back to their phone conversation last night. Peter had said to her, "I'm tall and pretty well built, a little balding on top."

"Okay, well," she'd replied nervously, "I'm five-five, blond, and I'll be wearing a purple dress."

Thinking about those words now, thinking how that simple exchange seemed to define perfectly the world of blind dating.

She had no problem with dating in her new life, her life without Jonathan. In fact, she was looking forward to it. She'd met her husband when he was just graduating from medical school and she was twenty-one. They'd gotten engaged almost immediately and that'd been the end of her social life as a single woman.

So now she'd have some fun. She'd meet interesting men, she'd begin to enjoy sex again. She knew dating would be work at first, but she'd try to relax, try to enjoy the company of men, try not to be bitter, try not to be too much of a widow.

But even as she was thinking about that her thoughts went somewhere else: Would she ever actually fall in *love* again?

The way she'd once been so completely in love with Jonathan?

And would anybody love her completely?

At another red light Marissa reached up and twisted the mirror in her direction, glanced into it. The sun was now below the horizon and the light was dim, but she decided she passed the rearview test with flying colors: full lips, a wrinkle-less face reminiscent of Michelle Pfeiffer's (in a dusk-lit Toyota mirror, at least), a petite nose.

And the bod? Slim and pretty firm, and, though she knew her boobs wouldn't land her on the cover of the latest Victoria's Secret catalog, she had a feeling that, in a pair of nice, tight jeans, her

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butt'd draw some serious attention.

At least around Portsmouth, Maine.

Hell yes, she told herself, she'd find a man who was right for her. Somebody who could appreciate the cowgirl within her, the girl whose Texan grandfather had taught her to ride and shoot.

Or maybe she'd find somebody who'd love her academic side—her writing and poetry and her love of teaching, which had been her job just after college.

Or somebody who could laugh with her—at stupid movies, at odd sights on the streets downtown, at dumb jokes. (How she loved laughing—and how little of it she'd done lately.)

Then Marissa Cooper thought: No, wait, wait . . . She'd find a man who loved *everything* about her.

But then the tears started again and she pulled off the road quickly, surrendering to the sobs.

"No, no, no. . . ."

She forced the images of her husband out of her mind.

The cold water, the gray water . . .

Five minutes later she'd calmed down. Wiped her eyes dry, reapplied makeup and lipstick. She drove into downtown Green Harbor and parked in a lot near the shops and restaurants, a half-block from the wharf.

A glance at the clock. It was just six-thirty. Peter O'Banion had told her that he'd be working until about seven and would meet her at seven-thirty. So she'd planned to come to town early to do some shopping—engage in a little retail therapy, she'd joked to herself. Who needed Prozac when you had MasterCard Gold?

After that she'd go to the restaurant early to wait for Peter. But then she wondered uneasily if it would be all right if she sat at the bar by herself. What would people think? Would they stare at her? Would they—

Then she said to herself sternly, What the hell're you thinking, girl? Of *course* it'd be all right. She could do anything she wanted. This was *her* night.

Go on, get out there. Get started on your new life.

Unlike upscale Green Harbor, fifteen miles south, Yarmouth, Maine, is largely a fishing and packing town and, as such, is studded with shacks and bungalows whose occupants prefer transport like battered F150s, Japanese half-tons, older SUVs.

But just outside of town is a cluster of nice houses set in the woods on a hillside overlooking the bay. The cars in *these* driveways are Lexuses and Acuras mostly and the SUVs here sport leather interiors and GPS systems and not, unlike their downtown neighbors', rude bumper stickers or Jesus fish.

The neighborhood even has a name: Cedar Estates.

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Wearing tan coveralls and carrying his toolbox, Joseph Bingham now walked up the driveway of one of these houses. He double-checked the address to make sure he had the right house, then rang the bell. A moment later a pretty woman in her late thirties opened the door. She was thin, her hair a little frizzy, and even through the screen door she smelled of alcohol. She wore skin-tight jeans and a white sweater.

"Yeah?" she asked.

"I'm with the cable company." He showed her the ID. "I have to reset your converter boxes."

She blinked. "The TV?"

"That's right."

"They were working yesterday." She turned to look hazily at the gray glossy rectangular screen of the large set in her living room. "Wait, I was watching CNN earlier. It was fine."

"You're only getting half the channels you're supposed to. The whole neighborhood went down. We have to reset them manually. Or I can reschedule if—"

"Naw, it's okay. Don't wanta miss *COPS*. You ever watch that?" She swung the door open. "Come on in."

Joseph walked inside, felt her eyes carefully examining him. He got this a lot from women. His career wasn't the best in the world and he wasn't classically good-looking but he was in great shape—he worked out every day—and he'd been told he "exuded" some kind of masculine energy. He didn't know about that. He just liked to think he had a lot of self-confidence.

"You want a drink?" she asked.

"Can't on the job."

"Sure?"

"Yep."

In fact, Joseph wouldn't have minded a drink. But this wasn't the place for it. Besides, he was looking forward to a nice glass of spicy Pinot Noir after he finished here. It often surprised people that somebody in his line of work liked—and knew about—wines.

"I'm Barbara."

"Hi, Barbara. I'm Joe."

She led him through the house to each of the cable boxes, sipping her drink as she went. She was drinking straight vodka, it seemed.

"You have kids," Joseph said, nodding at the picture of two young children on a table in the den. "They're great, aren't they?"

"If you like pests," she muttered.

He frowned at this but she didn't notice.

He clicked buttons on the cable box and stood up. "Any others?"

"Last box's in the bedroom. Upstairs. I'll show you. Wait . . ." She went off and refilled her glass, then joined him again. She led him up the stairs and paused at the top of the landing. Again, she

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looked him over, more flirt this time.

"Where are your kids tonight?" he asked.

"The pests're at the bastard's," she said, laughing sourly. "We're doing the joint-custody thing, my ex and me."

"So you're all alone here in this big house?"

"Yeah. Pity, huh?"

Joseph didn't know if it was or not. *She* definitely didn't seem to think so.

"So," he said, "which room's the bedroom?" They'd stalled in the hallway.

"Yeah. Sure. Follow me," she said, her voice low and seductive.

In the bedroom she sat on the unmade bed and sipped the drink. He found the cable box and unplugged a cable, then fitted it back in the unit. He pushed the On button of the TV set.

It crackled to life.

"Could you try the remote?" he asked.

"Sure," Barbara said groggily. She turned away to find it, and as soon as she did Joseph came up behind her with the rope that he'd just taken from his pocket. He slipped it around her neck and twisted it tight, using a pencil for leverage. A brief scream was stifled as her throat closed up and she tried desperately to escape, to turn, to scratch him with her nails. The vodka soaked the bedspread as the glass bounced off the bed and rolled against the wall.

In a few minutes she was dead.

Joseph sat beside the body, catching his breath. Barbara had fought surprisingly hard. It had taken all his strength to keep her pinned down and let the garrote do its job.

Glancing at his hands, encased in clear latex gloves, which he'd worn since he'd arrived, he observed that the rubber hadn't torn. No, they were fine. He'd left no fingerprints.

He dragged Barbara's body off the bed and into the center of the bedroom and pulled her sweater up over her head. He undid the button of her jeans.

But then he paused. Wait. What was his name supposed to be?

Frowning, he thought back to his conversation last night.

Which name had he used?

Then he nodded. That's right. He'd told Marissa Cooper his name was Peter.

He repeated it to himself. Peter O'Banion.

A glance at the clock. Not even seven P.M. Plenty of time to finish up here and get to Green Harbor, where Marissa and a nice glass of Pinot Noir awaited.

He unzipped Barbara's jeans, then started tugging them down to her ankles.

Marissa Cooper sat on a park bench, huddled against the cold

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wind that swept over the Green Harbor wharf. She was watching the couple lounging in the enclosed stern of the large boat tied up to the dock in front of her.

Like so many boat names this one was a pun: *Maine Street.*

She'd bought some fun lingerie (wondering, a little discouraged, if anyone other than her dog would ever see her wearing it) and had been on her way to the restaurant when the lights of the harbor—and the gently rocking motion of this elegant boat—caught her attention.

Through the plastic windows on the rear deck of the *Maine Street* she could see the couple sipping champagne and sitting close together, a handsome pair—he was tall and in very good shape, plenty of salt-and-pepper hair, and she, blond and pretty. They were laughing and talking. Flirting like crazy. Then, finishing their champagne, they disappeared down into the cabin. The teak door slammed shut.

Thinking about the lingerie in the bag she carried, thinking about resuming dating, Marissa again pictured Peter O'Banion. Wondered how this evening would go. A chill hit her and she rose and went on to the restaurant.

Sipping a glass of fine Chardonnay (and sitting very comfortably at the bar by herself—way to go, girl!), Marissa's thoughts shifted from dating to what she might do for work. She wasn't in a huge hurry. There was Jonathan's insurance money. The savings accounts, too. The house was nearly paid for. But it wasn't that she needed to work; it was that she *wanted* to. How she'd loved teaching. . . . Maybe she'd try that again. Get her certificate here in Maine. Or writing—find a job at one of the local newspapers.

Or she might even go to medical school. She remembered the times Jonathan would tell her about some of the things he was doing for patients at the hospital and she'd understood them perfectly. Marissa had a very logical mind and had been, consistently, an A student.

Another glass of wine.

Feeling sad, then feeling exhilarated. Her moods bobbed like the orange buoys marking the lobster traps sitting on the floor of the gray ocean.

She thought again about the man she was waiting for in this romantic, candlelit restaurant.

A moment of panic. Should she call Peter and tell him that she wasn't ready for this yet? Go home, have another wine, put on some Mozart, light a fire. Curl up with the dog, be content with her own company.

She began to reach for her cell phone.

But suddenly a memory came to her. A memory from life *before* Jonathan. She remembered being a little girl, riding a pony beside

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her grandfather, who was on his tall appaloosa. She recalled watching the lean old man calmly draw a revolver and sight down at the ground, where, the little girl saw to her shock, a rattlesnake was coiled to strike at Marissa's Shetland. The sudden shot blew the snake into a bloody mess on the sand.

They'd ridden on, but he'd worried that the girl would be traumatized having witnessed the death. Up the trail they'd dismounted. He'd crouched beside her and told her not to feel bad—that he had to shoot the snake.

"But it's all right, honey. His soul's on its way to heaven."

She'd frowned.

"What's the matter?" her grandfather had asked.

"That's too bad. I want him to go to hell."

How Marissa missed that tough little girl. And she knew that if she called Peter to cancel tonight, it would be a step backwards for her. No, Peter was the first step, an absolutely necessary step, to getting on with her life without Jonathan.

And then there he was—a good-looking, balding man. Great body, too, she observed. He was in a dark suit. Beneath it he wore a black T-shirt, not a white polyester shirt with a loud tie, which you saw so often in this area.

She waved and he responded with a charming smile.

He walked up to her. "Marissa? Peter."

A firm grip.

She gave him back one equally firm.

He sat next to her at the bar and ordered a glass of Pinot Noir. Sniffed it with pleasure, then clinked his glass to hers.

They sipped.

"I wasn't sure if you'd be late," she said. "Sometimes it's hard to get off work when you want to."

"I pretty much control my own hours," he said.

They chatted for a few minutes and then went to the hostess's stand and were shown to the table he'd reserved. A moment later they were seated next to the window. Spotlights on the outside of the restaurant shone down into the dark water, and though the sight troubled her at first, thinking about Jonathan's body in the ocean, she forced her thoughts away and concentrated on Peter.

They made small talk. He was divorced and had no children, though he'd always wanted them. She and Jonathan hadn't had children, either, she told him. Talking about the weather in Maine, about politics. They racked up a decent score of things they had in common.

"Been shopping?" he asked, smiling. Nodding at the pink-and-white-striped bag she'd set beside her chair.

"Long underwear," she joked. "It's supposed to be a long winter."

They talked some more, finishing one bottle of wine, then had

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one more glass each, though it seemed to her that she was drinking more than he was. She was getting tipsy. Watch out there, girl. Keep your wits about you.

But then she thought about Jonathan and drank down the whole glass, feeling the warm giddiness push away the pain.

Near ten P.M. he looked around the emptying restaurant. He fixed his gaze on her and said, "How about we go outside?"

Marissa hesitated. Okay, this is it, she thought to herself. What's it going to be? You can leave, or you can go out there with him.

She thought of her resolution; she thought of Jonathan. And said firmly, "Yep. Let's go."

Outside, they walked side by side along the empty walkway beside the dock.

They came to the bench where she'd been sitting earlier and she nodded at it and they sat down. Peter sat next to her. She felt his presence—the closeness of a strong man, which she hadn't felt for some time now. It was thrilling, comforting, and unsettling all at the same time.

They looked at the boat, the *Maine Street.*

They sat in silence for a few minutes, huddling against the cold.

Peter stretched. His arm went along the back of the bench, noncommittal, not exactly around her shoulders but not avoiding them, either. She could easily feel his muscles.

How strong he was, she noted.

It was then that she glanced down and saw a twisted length of white rope protruding from his pocket, about to fall out.

She nodded at it. "You're going to lose something."

He glanced down. Picked it up, flexed it in his fingers. Unwound it.

She wondered what it was for.

"Tool of the trade," he said, looking at her querying frown.

Then he wound it up tight and returned it to his pocket.

Peter looked back to the *Maine Street,* at the couple now out of the bedroom and sipping champagne again on the rear deck.

"That's your husband in there, the handsome guy?" he asked.

"Yes," Marissa said, "that's Jonathan." And shivered again, more from disgust than from the cold, as she watched him kiss the petite blonde.

She started to ask Peter if he was going to do it tonight—to kill her husband—but then decided that he, probably like most hit men, would prefer to speak in euphemisms. She asked simply, "When's it going to happen?"

They were now walking slowly along the wharf again.

Peter had started to answer her question when another couple had turned the corner from the restaurant and headed toward them. He'd decided it was better not to be seen sitting here, so

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close to Jonathan's boat.

"When?" he now asked, looking back toward Jonathan and the blonde. "Depends. That woman in there with him—who's she?"

"One of his little slut nurses. I don't know. Karen, maybe."

"She's spending the night?"

"No. I've been spying on him for a month. He'll kick her out around midnight. He can't stand clinging mistresses. There'll be another one tomorrow. But not before noon."

Peter nodded as he studied the boat. "Then I'll do it tonight. After she leaves." He glanced at Marissa. "I'll handle it like I was telling you—after he's asleep I'll get on board, tie him up, and take the boat out a few miles. Then I'll make it look like he got tangled in the anchor line and went overboard. Has he been drinking much?"

"Is there water in the ocean?" she asked wryly.

"Good, that'll help. Then I'll drive the boat close to Huntington and take a raft back in. Just let her drift." Nodding at the *Maine Street.*

"You always make it look like an accident?" Marissa asked, wondering if asking a question like this was breaking some kind of hit-man protocol.

"As often as I can. That job I did tonight? I mentioned it yesterday? It was taking care of a woman in Yarmouth. She'd been abusing her own kids. I mean, basically torturing them. She wouldn't give up custody, but she wouldn't stop hurting the kids and the husband couldn't get them to say anything to the police. They didn't want to get her in trouble."

"God, how terrible."

Peter nodded. "I'll say. So the husband hired me. I made it look like that rapist from Upper Falls broke in and killed her."

Marissa considered this. Then she asked, "Did you . . . ? I mean, you were pretending to be a rapist. . . ."

"Oh God, no." Peter laughed. "I wouldn't do that."

So hit men have standards, she reflected. At least some of them do.

He added, "Though it was pretty gross poking around to find a used condom behind that massage parlor on Knightsbridge Street."

"You left it at the scene? For evidence?"

"Right."

"That was smart." She looked at him. "Aren't you worried I'm a policewoman or something, trying to set you up? I mean, I just got your name out of that magazine. *Worldwide Soldier.*"

"You do this long enough, you get a feel for who're real customers and who aren't. Anyway, I spent the last week checking you out. You're legitimate."

If a woman paying someone twenty-five thousand dollars to kill her husband can be called legitimate.

Which reminded her . . .

She took a thick envelope out of her pocket. Handed it to him. It

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disappeared into the pocket with the white rope.

"Peter . . . wait, your name's not really Peter, is it?"

"No, but it's the one I'm using for this job."

"Okay, well, Peter, he won't feel anything?" she asked. "No pain?"

"Not a thing. Even if he were conscious, like I was telling you last night, that water's so cold he'll probably pass out and die of shock before he drowns."

They'd reached the end of the wharf and they turned around and started back toward downtown Green Harbor.

As they passed the *Maine Street* Peter glanced at her as Marissa in turn watched her husband caressing the hair of the blonde, who now seemed irritated with him.

Peter asked, "You're sure about doing this?"

And Marissa asked herself, Am I sure about wanting Jonathan dead?

Jonathan—the man who tells me he goes fishing with the boys every weekend but in truth takes his nurses out on the boat for his little trysts. Who spends our savings on them. Who announced a few years after getting married that he'd had a vasectomy and didn't want the children he'd promised we'd have. Who lectures me like a ten-year-old about his job or current events, never even hearing me say, "I understand, honey." Who nagged me into quitting a job I loved. Who shoved me down the stairs in a rage last month when I told him I really wanted to go back to work. Who complains whenever I wear sexy clothes but who stopped sleeping with me two years ago. Who gets violent whenever I bring up divorce because a doctor at a teaching hospital needs a pretty little wife to get ahead. . . .

Marissa Cooper suddenly pictured the shattered corpse of a rattlesnake lying bloody on a hot patch of yellow Texas sand.

It's all right, honey. His soul's on its way to heaven.

That's too bad. I want him to go to hell. . . .

"I'm sure," she said.

Peter shook her hand and said, "I'll take care of things from here. Go home. You'll probably hear from the police in a day or two. You should practice playing the grieving widow."

"I can handle that," Marissa said. "I've been a grieving wife for years."

Pulling her coat collar up high, she returned to the parking lot, not looking back at either her husband or at the man who was about to kill him. She climbed into her Toyota and fired up the engine, found some good old rock-and-roll on the radio, turned the volume up high, and left Green Harbor.

Marissa cranked the windows down, filling the car with sharp autumn air, rich with the scent of wood smoke and old leaves, and drove fast through the night, thinking about her future, about her life without Jonathan. ●

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Checking Out

by Robert Barnard

In April of this year Scribner published Robert Barnard's latest novel *The Bones in the Attic*. It's a non-series book, which *Publishers Weekly* calls a "superbly written suspense novel" and *Booklist* hails as "crime writing at its best from one of the great contemporary masters of mystery." And Mr. Barnard's short stories are at least as good as his novels, as you'll see from this fine example. ¶

On the bathroom of the Wayfarers' Hotel just outside Halifax Charles Marriott stood at the lavatory marvelling at the fad in modern hotels of putting mirrors everywhere in their rooms, forcing you to watch yourself doing things that you'd very much rather not watch yourself doing. It was a fashion, he decided, that could only please narcissists with an obsession about their own—

But he put the thought from him, because he was a fastidious person.

Hotel chains for the overnighting traveller, even one aimed at the distinctly well-heeled ones, were hardly Charles's usual choice of accommodation. He had selected it with his visitor in mind, deciding he would feel more at ease here than in some recherché little establishment with individual furnishings and choice and amusing menus. He had already taken the liberty of ordering from room service rump steak and chips for the two of them. Realising that it would be invidious to order one well-done and one rare, he had ordered medium-rare for both of them. The occasion called for self-sacrifice as well as a nice discrimination.

Charles was used to delicate negotiations, both in his former life as a dealer in the fine arts and in his present one as the only Scottish Tory MP in the House of Commons. But the negotiations ahead were quite beyond and outside his previous experience, if only because they concerned not his professional interests but his personal ones—his emotional life, if one must use the clichés of the popular press, something he usually rigorously avoided. His emotional life had been, until the previous year, a matter of occasional liaisons tactfully pursued—kept delicately under wraps

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because he was by nature private, even secretive, and because none of them engaged more than a fraction of his mind or personality.

Laura was different.

Laura had been for ten years the wife of a man whom Charles could only contemplate with wonder, considered as the mate of a fragile, poised, discriminating figure such as Laura. He always described him in his own mind as a carpenter. To think of him as a furniture maker would have raised him a notch or two in most people's social registers, and that he didn't care to do. Charles told himself that, as far as he could learn, the furniture the man had made had been essentially derivative, his own version of well-known Italian or Scandinavian twentieth-century styles. He was a skilled, dedicated, perhaps even an imaginative imitator.

And he was *coming to eat medium-rare steak with him in the* Wayfarers' Hotel, twenty minutes from his workplace, in a quarter of an hour's time.

The telephone rang.

"Mr. . . . er . . . Marriott, you have a visitor. He says he is early, and wonders whether you are free."

Charles felt a flash of irritation. He liked his everyday existence to be ordered, prearranged, *expected.*

"Ah well . . . no harm done. I've nothing particular on hand. Tell him he can come up at once."

He spent the minute before the knock on the door rearranging things that needed no rearranging. When he opened the door he saw a figure he recognised from some of Laura's snapshots: sturdy, roughly dressed, almost dirty, with a thick head of hair and piercing blue eyes. The man must have come straight from work, he decided. He had wanted the hotel to be convenient, but not that convenient.

He held out his hand and made contact with the gnarled, scarred flesh of the carpenter's hand.

"Come in, come in. Good to meet you at last, Mr. Easton."

The man—Laura's husband—made a sort of jerk of the head, not a nod. Either he was a man of few words or he was insistent that any words or any silent gestures that came from him had to be truthful ones. Even a nod could have been taken as acceptance of Charles's claim to be pleased to meet him. Of course he was not pleased to meet him. Will Easton knew for certain he had been asked to the Wayfarers' for business, not for pleasure.

"Come in and sit down. Not the sort of furniture you're used to—I hear yours is very special. How have you got on since . . . these last few months?"

There was a silence.

"As well as could be expected, without the woman I love."

Charles cleared his throat.

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"Yes, well—of course that is something I wanted us to talk about. Maybe we should wait until the meal arrives."

"I see no point in waiting. I can't see us finding much else to talk about."

This was undeniably true. Charles had an uneasy sense of the interview already slipping away from him.

"Yes, well, of course Laura does rather come between us. Difficult to talk about anything else with that question unsettled."

"We would have nothing to talk about in any case."

His honesty was by no means disarming. In fact, it was aggressive. And of course, the things he gruffly muttered were entirely true. If they had found themselves sitting opposite each other in a railway carriage, Charles would have nodded and then opened his *Times* and used it as a barrier between them. Charles knew his own kind, and stuck to them.

"Perhaps not a great deal," he said, suppressing a sigh. If only the man would take one tiny step or two towards making all this easier! "Laura, then. The facts, bluntly. She met me on one of her sales trips to London, where she was drumming up new customers for your furniture. We started an affair—"

"How long after meeting was that?"

"Is that important? . . . Three or four weeks, so far as I remember."

"It's not very long, that—not to make you turn your back on ten years of marriage."

He seemed to specialise in bleak truths stated baldly.

"Perhaps not. If I may go on. I am Member of Parliament for a large rural constituency in Scotland. Intensely rural, I would call it. Many of my constituents are members of the Free Church of Scotland, and most of them have moral standards that are . . . traditional."

"You mean they're narrow-minded?"

"Well, er, something like that."

"I understand that. I'm narrow-minded about some things myself."

Charles pursed his lips, then forced himself to continue.

"They will not be happy at my marrying a divorcée. Anything less legal, more present-day—I mean arrangements such as having a 'partner'—would be quite unacceptable."

There was silence, and Charles looked out from under his beautifully-shaped eyebrows to see the effect of his words on his visitor.

"I don't see why you are confiding your problems to me."

"I think you do," said Charles, trying unsuccessfully to keep the impatience out of his voice. "You must realize that your marriage has broken down. With your agreement, the divorce could be painless and quick—"

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The man jumped out of his chair.

"Quick! Is that supposed to be some kind of inducement? After ten years of the happiest marriage anyone could have, do you think I'm likely to see it as a plus that the ending should be *quick?* Do you think there's *any* circumstance that would make it *painless?*"

He spat out the words with a blazing contempt for the man he was talking to, and for the modern world that thought it could do away with emotional turmoil through "civilized" legal proceedings. He went over to the window to collect himself. He looked as if he would have preferred simply to walk out of the room.

"I don't want to be tactless," said Charles, turning away from the heaving back, "but the marriage can hardly have been one of the happiest on both sides or—"

But, perhaps fortunately, they were interrupted by a pair of waiters wheeling a trolley. They fussed around at the inconveniently low table, setting out cutlery, glasses, napkins, and finally two plates of steak and chips, leaving two little bowls of strawberries under glass covers on the dumbwaiter. Charles had begun to wonder whether Will Easton would touch the food, but he came back from the window where he had been gazing broodingly over the moorlands towards Halifax and set to with a ravenous hunger. Perhaps, Charles thought, he had been unable to eat for the tension inside him in the hours leading up to the meeting.

"I'm glad they interrupted us," said Charles, sitting down and taking up his knife and fork, "because we were in danger of getting entangled in irrelevancies. The past is one of them, I'm afraid. What we should be looking at now is the future." He cut into the steak, regretting the absence of blood flowing from its interior. "I take your points that the divorce cannot be painless, and that there is something distressing about an apparently happy and fruitful marriage ending *quick*ly. But what is the alternative?"

Easton's first burst of hunger had abated, and he paused, the knife and fork pointed into a triangle over his plate. He said nothing, so Charles had to.

"It seems to me there is no future in the pair of you remaining married for a year or two more, until Laura can get an 'irretrievable breakdown' divorce. What you need is a clean break, so that you can get on with your life, perhaps find another partner."

"I hate that word!" said Easton, setting to at the steak again, perhaps to hide the intensity of his feelings. "She was not some kind of business associate. She was my lover, my companion, my other pair of eyes, my friend, the other part of me, the loss of which leaves me crippled. I don't want to 'get on with my life.' I have no life worth getting on with anymore."

Charles had wanted pedantically to interrupt and say that

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Laura had indeed been his business associate—had helped him enormously in building up his furniture business. But the intensity of the man's feelings made him leave a few moments' silence.

He had never known what sort of marriage Laura had had with this man. She seldom mentioned his name, and when she did it was with respect and affection. If he had questioned her, she had simply shaken her head and offered no information. Now he had a clue about why she had felt that she had to escape from the relationship.

"I appreciate the strength of your feelings," he said. "But I wonder whether, eventually, Laura found she could no longer live at your level of intensity."

Easton looked at him, incredulous.

"Intensity! What would you know about intensity? What sort of a relationship would it be, without it?"

"Well, there *are* other sorts," said Charles, his innate pedantry coming to the fore again. "Marriages have very often been successfully based on shared interests, similar or complementary characters, even on very different activities that take the man and wife apart for much of the time, so that the time spent together is fresh and enjoyable."

"Hah!"

"You mustn't assume that the sort of marriage that suits you is the sort that suits everybody."

"Laura never told me that it didn't suit her. I know it did—I could feel it in her body."

"Perhaps at first—"

"Not just at first." Will Easton pushed his plate aside. "Look, you said just now you didn't want to go over the past. And I certainly don't want to go over my marriage with you. Just come out with it, man. Tell me what you want."

"I want a quick and easy divorce for Laura, with as little publicity as possible. Unfortunately I have a certain publicity value, especially in the Scottish newspapers, as the only Tory MP north of the border. At the moment hardly anybody there knows about Laura. She certainly hasn't been anywhere near the constituency. That's how we want to keep it, until the divorce has gone through."

"We? Shouldn't that be you?"

"Both of us. Of course my political career is more important to me, but Laura supports me up to the hilt. It's very generous of her. I'm sure she'd be happier if I went back to my old job as artistic consultant to Christerby's."

Easton's face creased in contempt. "What do you know about *art?*"

"Not much as a creator. But a great deal as an appreciator."

"You mean you're some arty-farty connoisseur. You can tell when

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someone has created something beautiful. Or are you just a valuer? You tell people that this year Manet's worth a great deal more than Monet. I'd rather carve cherry stones or construct ships in bottles than what you do. You're just a flea on the body of real art."

"I might be inclined to agree with you," said Charles, with hideously insincere self-depreciation. "But I do know real art when I see it."

"I suppose it gives you a little thrill. And that's what Laura left me for."

"Well, the fact is that she did leave you. There's no getting away from that, even if you do think—naturally, perhaps—that she made a terrible choice, took a giant step downwards."

"You obviously don't think so."

"Well, I must admit—this is natural too, perhaps—that I don't. But I do think you have to make a decision. I've put my cards—Laura's and my cards—on the table. We want a divorce, and a discreet one. I can't see you have anything to gain by denying her one."

"I can't see what I have to gain by giving her one. I don't see what's in it for me."

Charles Marriott seized on this, perhaps too quickly.

"Ah well, if that's what's worrying you, it should be quite easy to come to some accommodation."

He had stood up, and was now behind his chair in a pompous, pontifical pose such as he had sometimes taken up in his life as an art dealer when advocating a slightly dodgy course of action.

"Accommodation?" Will Easton sounded as if he thought he was being offered a new flat.

"Yes. After all, you've suffered loss in this matter—loss of a splendid partner and promotions executive. It's quite right that we should agree—quietly of course—on some form of compensation."

Will's eyes veered between bewilderment and anger.

"Compen . . . You're not . . . You can't believe I'd—"

Charles held up his hand. "Just hold your horses. Don't take up the high moral tone. What I'm suggesting is a perfectly normal business arrangement."

"You're proposing to *buy* Laura from me!"

"Nothing of the sort. It's perfectly normal to—"

"Buy her and bribe me!"

"You do not have Laura, so there is no way I could buy her from you. She has chosen to step down from the high emotional level of her life with you, and I'm just trying to facilitate the next move in this little drama by—"

"Little drama!" Easton almost yelled. "This is my life you're talk-

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ing about. You think I'm too thick to grasp what you're getting at, don't you?"

"Not at all, dear boy—"

"Dear boy! You make me puke! I'm not, either. Just thinking of Laura in bed with—"

He almost seemed to spit. But suddenly his hand went into the jerkin that formed part of his work gear and came out with a slim, deadly chisel. Charles could hardly believe his eyes, and when the chisel was thrust towards him all he could do was put out his hands. But he could neither grasp the chisel nor the strong wrists. The next moment the chisel slashed him across the throat.

Charles stood for a moment in shock, as if waiting for a second cut. Then he stepped backwards and clutched the door to the bathroom. He was conscious of blood flowing in incredible quantities down his shirt front, onto his jacket. He clutched at his throat, and the thick, sticky mess overwhelming his hands appalled him. Then he crashed to the cool, tiled floor of the bathroom.

He was conscious of a voice in the next room speaking on the telephone, saying something like, "Come quickly." But he knew no one could come quickly enough. His eyes stayed open almost by their own volition, and in the ceiling-to-floor mirrors he lay watching himself doing something he would very much rather not have watched himself doing. ●

"Yes, lad, I used to work on a ship. That was before I discovered computer piracy."

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Art by Ron Buccalo

MOODY'S BLUES

by Hal Charles

That Friday in March when the renters moved into the old Forbes place a bad feeling stirred in Moody's gut. The three rusty pickups passed him like a funeral procession before pulling into the driveway of the home Matt and Kathy had always kept spotless before their deaths about a year ago. Unable to decide whether to sell the place, their four kids had compromised on renting it out as a temporary source of income.

There were six newcomers. Maybe because they didn't look much alike, they didn't seem to Moody a real family—more like older hippies. A woman with two large, yellowed canines balancing a cigarette between her lips, a bearded man older than Moody was, three men who looked to be in their mid thirties, and a little girl with a dirty blond ponytail, about ten. No sir, they sure weren't the second coming of the Waltons.

And of course, Cutler, Kentucky, wasn't Walton's Mountain, either. "Fact is," Moody often declared to the boys gathered round the Cutler Marathon to listen to one of his stories, "we got more killings in our little community than a big city like Lexington." No

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one had a good explanation as to why death had taken up permanent residence in a tiny town in the heart of the Bluegrass. They were too far out in the country, declared Pete Culross between puffs on his unfiltered cigarette, to get that city water filled with "fluoride and sech." And Bobby Lee Plummer, a local sage with one year of community college, swore it was the fault of the army depot. "We know they have all that nerve-gas stuff stored out there," he reasoned, "so if they're willing to tell us that much, what else you think they got?"

Hal Charles is a pseudonym for two professors at Eastern Kentucky University. It is rare to find a writing team whose work comes out as seamless as theirs. Their latest story, which may be the first in a series, was "character generated," they say: "The story helped us understand what Faulkner meant when he said he just followed his characters around with a pen and recorded what they said and did." The town of Cutler, Kentucky, is fictional.

Moody was down at the end of his driveway sorting through the mail when the three pickups passed. No one had returned his friendly wave, and the last thing he saw was the little girl's eyes looming in the back window like a pair of cue balls. 4:40. Karoline wouldn't be home from her job at the Wal-Mart for another hour at least. He scrounged around the kitchen till he found the banana bread his wife had baked the night before. Moody didn't much like anything made from rotten bananas anyway, and taking it to the newcomers was the neighborly thing to do. Maybe someday they'd put that on his tombstone. RILEY MOODY—ALWAYS WENT THAT EXTRA MILE.

With the Forbeses' deaths, the nearest neighbors had lived about three miles down and around the big bend of the Kentucky River. It was gonna be nice to have people close by when Karoline got into one of her week-long bad spells. Especially since those spells seemed to be more and more frequent. As Moody made his way down the narrow road spider-webbed with cracks, the sky looked like a big piece of slate balanced on the hilltops, making the valley feel like a tomb. Dust still hovered over the old Forbes driveway as he started up.

At the top of the hill he ran into the ponytailed girl. She was flipping an open jackknife into the spring soil as if she were playing mumbletypeg.

"Your momma and daddy let you fool around with dangerous weapons?" Moody asked.

She continued to throw her knife at some imaginary target without looking up. "Don't have no momma or daddy," she said,

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"and I don't know what this 'dangerous weapon' you're talking about is."

"Everybody's got a momma and daddy, child," said Moody.

"Jerrold often tells me I was 'born of the Devil,' if that's what you mean."

Moody rested his snakeskin boot on a downed tree and tried another approach. "My daddy used to have the biggest knife in all Clement County. Momma called it 'The Widow-maker.'"

"Why's that?"

" 'Cause if he made one slip, she was gonna be a widow."

"Clemily in there"—she gestured at the wooden house—"is the closest thing I got to a momma."

Moody sat down on the log. "You sure look old enough to go to school. What grade you in?"

Expertly she closed the knife with an open palm. "When we left Letcher County, I was in third grade, but we just got here today. They haven't had time to put me back into school yet."

Moody remembered how when Carol was in third grade she was almost too much to handle.

"What're you holding there?" she asked.

"Banana bread. Wife baked it yesterday." He held it out. "Want some?"

The little girl eyed the plate the way he looked at a snake that he suddenly came upon in the woods. Moody put the plate down close to her. She moved forward and lifted up the aluminum foil. "Ain't had much to eat since breakfast and that was just a can of Dew." She pinched off a corner of the bread. "Smells good. Don't guess it would hurt none."

As she placed the morsel in her mouth, a deep voice came from the direction of the house. "Joy Lynn, you'd best put that down 'less you want your mouth washed out with vinegar."

The little girl spun around. "Jason, I—"

"Clemily'll have us some supper fixed in a while. Meantime, why don't you help her unpack?"

" 'Cause she's so bossy and smells like a cigarette all the time, that's why."

Jason jumped off the porch. He seemed about ten years younger than Moody, but his shoulders were almost twice as big.

"My fault," apologized Moody. "I was just trying to be neighborly and . . . Joy Lynn was the first person I ran into."

Jason shoved the little girl in the direction of the house and stood so close to Moody that he could smell the man's breath. He'd been drinking something like 'shine. His hair was long and stringy and crusted with oil and dirt. The air grew cold and still. "Where we come from," the stranger said without emotion, "a man who goes around offering treats to little girls ain't a man a'tall. He's

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kinda like a bull that hangs 'round other bulls 'steada cows, if you catch my drift."

"Listen," said Moody, standing toe-to-toe with his antagonist, "I'm only trying to do the neighborly thing. If you don't like banana bread, just tell me."

The man put his two forefingers in his mouth and whistled loud enough to hurt Moody's ears. A large black dog that looked to Moody part Doberman, part Rottweiler, all hellhound came bounding toward him. "Sit, Scarf," the man commanded. "You take one step toward the house," he said to Moody, "and you save me the trouble of fixing my dog dinner."

Moody listened to the wind that blew down the palisades long ago formed by the Kentucky River. He didn't know what to do.

The little girl spit the piece of banana bread at him. "I didn't like your food nohow."

Jason slapped his dungareed thigh. "Joy Lynn, honey, you gonna be all right." Then they turned and walked back to the house, the dog at their heels.

Moody couldn't tell if the whistle he heard came from the wind rushing through the palisades or his own breath forcing itself out of the gap between his two front teeth.

Moody flipped through the sports pages of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* he had picked up when the framing crew had stopped for lunch at Hardee's. Not one darn piece of news about UK. If the Wildcats couldn't find them a big man for next year, they were gonna get killed off the boards. A few years ago it had been an honor just to be asked to wear the blue and white. Now Kentucky had to recruit like they wasn't king of the hill no more.

Karoline had set her purse on the kitchen table before he even noticed she'd come in.

"You're late," he said.

"Couldn't be helped. We got this young girl, couldn't be more than twenty, come into the store at shift change. Wants her money back on a coffeepot she'd been using since Christmas. Lordy, she had more babies than toes, and they wuz running every which way picking up stuff. People nowadays have more children than sense."

"We got some new neighbors today. Moved into Matt and Kathy's place. Gawd, I miss those two."

But she didn't hear him. She had already gone back into their bedroom.

"What's for supper?" Moody yelled after her.

"Baloney," she called. "And I know I made you a baloney sandwich for lunch."

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"No matter," he said, not wanting to tell her some crows at the job site had gotten lucky and he'd eaten hot fast-food.

"You'll have to get the stuff out yourself. I got to finish this quilt 'fore Carol comes back." She shut the door to the bedroom.

Moody stared at the oak door he had built himself, just like everything else in this cabin. He knew he should go back in there and talk to Karoline, but he knew equally well it wouldn't do any good. For the longest time he stared at the patterns in the oak trying to make sense of them. He dozed off, waking once when he thought he heard sirens, then falling back asleep.

Saturday morning Moody ran into Beverly Scruggs at the Cutler Marathon before he'd even gotten his first cup of coffee.

"See who's back in town?" Scruggs motioned toward the gas pump.

Moody stared through the plate glass covered with cigarette ads. "Sure looks like Carson Craft to me."

"They let him out of the FCI six months early for good behavior. Now we got the best paper-hanger in the Commonwealth back home."

Moody hated the way Scruggs tried to impress everybody using words he picked up off his satellite dish. Anybody else would've said "counterfeiter," but not good old Beverly. "You hear sirens last night," he asked, "or was I just dreaming?"

"You don't know?" said Luther Hagen from the next booth.

"Know what?" said Moody.

"Follow me."

Moody got up and hiked outside till Hagen stopped him by the FREE AIR pump. He pointed at the ground. "Tell me what you see."

The cement was stained dull like that time Karoline dropped her nail polish on the hearth.

"That's blood," announced Hagen. "Belonged to some guy who told Mary Lou he was from Detroit."

"Do tell," said Moody. "How'd blood get there?"

"Why this Detroit guy was shot right there. Didn't kill him, though, but they could've started a good blood drive just by sucking up what that boy left there."

"What really happened here last night?" said Beverly Scruggs.

"The Gunfight at the Cutler Marathon, they're calling it," said Charlie Wiggins, who had stopped filling his tank long enough to butt in. "Fact, that boy from Detroit, bleeding like a gutted pig, somehow got into his fancy sports car and took off like a bat outta hell. Little Davey Lackey didn't fare so well. Took a bullet through his chest."

"Now," commented Scruggs, "he's taking the big dirt sleep."

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"Hold it," said Moody, trying to make some sense of the story, "are you telling me there was a shooting here last night that's part of the Lackey-Conyers squabble?"

"Biggest feud in the South since the Hatfields and McCoys kissed and made up," said Charlie Wiggins. "Word is Old Man Conyers decided to end this thing by—"

"Bringing in some 'muscle from the Motor City,' " finished Beverly Scruggs.

"A hit man from Detroit in Cutler?" said Moody, wanting to tear out that satellite dish once and for all.

"Isn't that what I just said?" shot back Scruggs.

Moody stared down at the bloodstain. What was going on? When he was a boy, the only bloodshed was in the annual softball game between Cutler Baptist and Cutler Church of God, and that was for a good cause, the Old Nail Keg. He walked back inside and sat down where Mary Lou had poured his coffee. As he added cream and sugar, he heard a familiar voice.

"I'd like to buy you that cup."

Moody looked up to see Jason, the man he'd encountered at the Forbes place the day before.

"Yeah," continued Jason, "my brothers and me've gotten a little overprotective of Joy Lynn, her being the only girl in the family."

Moody just stared at him.

"And don't worry none about Scarf. Only thing that dog's interested in is rabbit."

"Coulda fooled me," said Moody.

"Oh, and that banana bread was sure good." Jason smiled. "Next time, we owe you." He snatched up Moody's check and headed to the cash register. "See you 'round, neighbor."

Moody began to stir the cream and coffee into one. Nothing made sense.

"Look, Mary Lou's done changed the score already." Beverly Scruggs pointed toward the checkout lane.

On the little chalkboard over the cash register, 11 had been crossed out and 12 written in. A dozen deaths already this year, noted Moody, scratching his head, and spring had just started last week.

Sunday morning after church Moody stood furiously lifting the black pump handle up and down. No matter how hard he stroked, he couldn't seem to pull up the cold water, the really cold water that slaked your thirst, the cold water that cooled your whole body down. Karoline was sitting on the back porch, alone, having one of her spells. It had started in church as Preacher Blithe was quoting the Twenty-Third Psalm, holding up the promise of the Lord as they walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Karoline

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had started whimpering, and no rod or staff could comfort her. Even Preacher Blithe had tried to talk with her after church, but she'd climbed into the pickup and said simply, "Take me home. We're not having Sunday fixin's with Aunt May and Uncle Hector today."

Moody had suggested they go for a drive, maybe up to Red River Gorge, or take the Palisades Ferry into Lexington and eat at Morrison's Cafeteria. But she'd preferred to sit on the back porch working on another section of her quilt.

"Some days you got to put up with warm water," his daddy had told him when he was too small to man the pump, "but don't you ever forget how good the cold stuff tastes."

But Moody couldn't remember. Leastways, not with Karoline. He began walking across the newly green field, over the split-rail fence, through the metal gate that kept Cooper's cattle off his property, down the limestone-littered road that led to the river. Once there, he pulled out a bag of the best stuff in the county, rolled it up in paper, lit it, and drew deeply. He'd promised Karoline he'd give up the "evil weed" when they'd married, but of course she'd promised to love, honor, and obey.

He walked along a sandbar that constantly shifted as the gate to lock ten was raised and lowered. The remains of a campfire and beer cans betrayed a teenagers' party. Adults woulda shot holes in the cans. Slowly Moody started to feel better, to get the taste of that really cold water. Then he began to imagine he could see the holes along the shore where his great-grandfather had legally planted hemp half a century earlier to help the war effort. Up ahead, on a familiar rock ledge, he spotted someone fishing.

Moody drew closer to the fisherman, who was sitting on what they'd been taught—about the time hair showed up under his armpits—to call Black Man Rock. He took one last long toke, then flipped his smoke into the river. It made a hissing sound like a small snake. The squatting figure sure looked familiar.

"Why, Joy Lynn, as I live and breathe," said Moody happily.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," she said without looking at him. "The boys done warned me and so did Papa Jim and Clemily."

"They're right." Moody picked up a flat rock that had been lying between his snakeskin boots. "Only I'm no stranger. We met two days ago."

"Don't you go throwing no rock," she warned. "You'll scare away the fish."

"Nothing to scare, leastways if you're gonna use breadcrumbs."

"And why shouldn't I, Mr. Smarty-pants?" Her eyes locked on his, daring him to answer.

"Breadcrumbs break up and float away when they hit the water.

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Mostly bluegill in this hole, and they like real worms or maybe a big, juicy cricket."

"Oh." As she stopped her arm in mid cast, her T-shirt slid up on her shoulder, revealing a skin discoloring that looked like a purple armband.

Moody climbed up on the rock. "So'd you like the banana bread after all?"

"Listen, I'm sorry I spit that out at you. I had to or Jason or Papa Jim woulda smacked me. I did give what you left to Scarf and he loved it." She smiled.

Moody smiled back and sat down beside her, wondering why Jason had lied to him. "So what made you decide to go fishing anyway?"

"Had to. Jeffrey shoved the pole in my hand and told me to take a hike. They had some business to take care of. Prob'ly has something to do with that guy that came to the house the other night in the coolest car I've ever seen. Spoke like he used his nose for his mouth and, get this, he drove a '55 BMW 507. How sweet! That sucker's got a 3.2 liter, 150 horsepower V-8 under the hood, and the shame of it is they only made two hundred and fifty-two of them."

"How did a little girl get to know so much about cars?"

"I'm not little. I'm already ten. And that's all the boys read, car magazines. They're always talking about what they're gonna buy themselves this fall."

"What about schoolbooks?" Moody said.

"Ain't no pictures of cars in schoolbooks. Just a lot of names and dates."

"Like the names of cars and the dates they came off the assembly line."

She punched him in the arm. Her smile was ringed with yellow teeth. "Guess you got me there."

"Say," said Moody, standing up, "what's say we catch ourselves some big, juicy crickets and see how many bluegill we can haul in before nightfall."

She jumped up. "That's a good idea. Know why?"

"Tell me."

" 'Cause"—she laughed—"fish taste a whole lot better'n banana bread anyways."

Moody pulled off state road 502 and slid into the Cutler Marathon parking lot at dusk. They had caught a batch of bluegill, and he had shown Joy Lynn how to string them on a cut branch. Karoline had been on a marathon of her own with that quilt of hers and couldn't stop to make supper. Didn't matter. The gas station

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cooked up the best fried chicken in the county because they never spared the grease. And the company wasn't bad, either.

As he climbed out of his F-150, he spotted an old friend pumping gas into a Kentucky state police cruiser.

"Toss right sweep on two," he called. "Ronnie Trapp, you're the only man I know I recognize better from the back than the front."

The trooper spun around. "Riley Moody, you old coon dog. Anybody else said that to me I'd arrest them for Indecent Advances, but not you. You musta followed my backside through the five hole a million times. How long has it been?"

Moody slapped him on the back. "Twenty years, maybe."

Trapp laughed. "No, partner, I mean since I saw you last."

"Why, you were just a little thing."

Trapp laughed again. "Moody, you old liar, I was never a little thing. Say, how's the family . . . your wife."

"Karoline's about the same as she ever was."

"Hey, check out these bars." The trooper pointed to his shirt.

"So it's Lieutenant Trapp now. Where they got you?"

"Post nine. Up in Richmond. I'm the new commander."

"Whew-ee, I always knew you'd be more than captain of the Woodhole Wackers. Hey, the other night I finally met somebody who's got shoulders wider than yours."

"No matter how wide your shoulders or fast your draw—"

"Speaking of fast draw," Moody said, leaning back against the gray cruiser, "you must be the ones investigating the Great Cutler Shootout here Friday night."

"Far as I'm concerned, it's just another drug deal gone bad. I-75 is one big conduit from Miami to Detroit, and it's only six miles away."

"Drug deal?" said Moody in disbelief. "Boys 'round here claim it was a hit man Houston Conyers called in from Detroit. Way to end the feud once and for all."

"The worst those feuding fools ever did was smack each other up the side of the head. Maybe rearrange a few teeth. Unfortunately, that Lackey kid got caught in the middle." The state policeman shook his head and removed the fuel nozzle from his car. "Folks round here never change, do they? A made-up story beats the truth every time."

"What are you telling me?" Moody pressed.

"I'm saying it was no hit. Just some drug dealer from Detroit who got himself shot. Unfortunately, he was only wounded. Climbed into his sports car and beat it outta Dodge."

Moody wondered aloud. "Wouldn't be a BMW, would it?"

Trapp thought awhile. "Seems to me it was. Some vintage model, too. We put out a statewide A.P.B., but couldn't find it. Say, how'd you know about the car?"

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Not wanting to get Joy Lynn involved, Moody answered, "One of the boys told me. That's the thing about made-up stories. Sometimes they contain a little grain of truth."

Spring slipped into summer, which passed as quickly as an afternoon shower. Moody's framing crew finished the custom job they were building in Richmond for some professor and moved on to a spec house in Waco. Beverly Scruggs's cattle got loose and wandered close to the army depot. When they started acting funny and stopped giving milk, Scruggs swore, "It's the beginning of mad cow disease in the U.S. of A." Moody decided Scruggs and his satellite dish deserved each other. Missy Turpin accidentally-on-purpose shot her husband during one of their frequent knock-down-drag-em-outs, Clephus Fester nose-dived off the Kentucky River Bridge, and Mary Lou had the chalk scoreboard up to 14. Bobby Lee started a pool, betting all comers Cutler would break its modern-day record of 21 before Christmas.

For Moody it was the summer of unspoken rules. Rule number one was, don't say boo to Karoline until she finished her quilt. That was okay because he taught himself to cook, and by August he was into the "Gourmet Meals" section of Karoline's *Betty Crocker's Cookbook*. Rule number two was, don't drive the welcome wagon up to the new neighbors' house. Moody did meet Papa Jim in June. By accident the F-150 stuck in the driveway mud after the water line burst. Looking like the sixty-year-old head of an Amish sect, Papa Jim stopped his king-cab truck, got out a chain, and hauled Moody loose. He drove off before Moody could even thank him.

Rule number three was, don't tell Joy Lynn's kin where she was on Sunday afternoons, not that they ever asked where she'd been—or cared. When the fishing dried up, Moody took the girl to the Kentucky Horse Park, Natural Bridge, and even to a Reds game. If nothing else, they sat on the rock, and he made up stories for her about the goings-on in Cutler. But one late-August Sunday stuck uppermost in his mind. They went up to the all-you-can-eat brunch at the Oak Tree Inn in Tilghman. Joy Lynn stuffed her face with mashed potatoes, grits, chicken wings, sweet corn, fried apples, and country ham like she was a bear getting ready to hibernate.

"You got a hollow leg, child?" said Moody. "Can't figure out anywhere else you could put all those fixings." He wiped his lips with his napkin.

Watching him, Joy Lynn did the same. "It's all so good."

"So what'd you like best?"

"The corn." She beamed. "I've been waiting all summer for the boys to harvest our corn crop, but they keep saying it's not ready

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yet." She looked at him sheepishly. "Do you suppose we could go back a third time? Sometimes when I'm bad and don't deserve no food, they don't feed me."

Moody fought the urge to react. "What about school? You eat there?"

She began twisting her napkin. "I'm . . . I'm not in school yet."

"School started in Clement County two weeks ago, honey."

"Papa Jim says that he's not sure we're going to stay past next week. So it don't make much sense to put me in when he'd have to take me right out again if we move on."

Moody felt a pain in his stomach that had nothing to do with all the food he had eaten trying to keep up with Joy Lynn. Before his momma'd passed on, she had told him, "You got the Moody Curse all right, Riley. You got the ability to put up with things you know in your heart ain't quite right without making them worse, but you know you eventually got to do something about them."

He knew his momma was right just as certain as he knew that time was almost on top of him.

"Eventually" arrived on Labor Day weekend. Saturday morning Moody busied himself with all the small tasks he could find. The lawnmower got a new spark plug and the front yard got mowed. Then he took the tiller he had salvaged from the junkyard and plowed the garden under. Nothing but a few leggy tomato plants and some undersized peppers that Karoline had neglected once she'd begun the quilt. After a baloney sandwich and pack of Nabs, he knew he couldn't put it off any longer, so he grabbed the hoe and headed through the field and up the hill.

So far back nobody could remember, the hill had been named Blind Man's Bluff. On it sat a lone oak that must have been well over a hundred years old. Beneath it was a rusty fence that was missing more spindles than it had. The fence encircled an area about twenty by twenty, and twice a year Moody hoed the grass loose and stood upright any of the headstones that had started to lean. He was careful not to disturb any of the large, natural stones, as the souls of the black people gone to rest had over time become just as precious to him as those of his own family. As usual, he was more patient around his momma's marker, kneeling down and cleaning out the growth so that not a single blade of grass was on top of it, and, as usual, when he got to the last headstone, he cried.

He was blinking his eyes clear when suddenly he heard a screaming from the direction of the house. He took off sprinting, unmindful of the holes various creatures had dug in the field. Sweat rolled down his face as he stumbled, righted himself, then passed through the honeysuckle hedge and spotted Karoline. She

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was standing on the back porch holding the quilt up as proud as a child who had won the second-grade coloring contest.

"I'm afinished," she yelled gleefully. "I'm afinished."

As Moody reached the back steps, she looked down at him and said earnestly, "Carol will be so pleased, won't she?"

Moody started up the wooden stairs.

"Do you think Carol will be coming home from college soon?" she asked.

Moody took the quilt from her and laid it over the railing. Then he took his wife's hands. "Karoline, you know Carol won't be coming home from college?"

Karoline stared quizzically into his eyes. "She won't?"

"No," said Moody emphatically, "she's—"

"That's right," said Karoline, quickly straightening up and jerking her hands free. "I forgot. She has that new job in . . . Louisville, isn't it?"

"It's not Louisville—"

"Cincinnati, then. She used to so love that zoo—"

"Karoline," Moody heard himself yelling, "our daughter is—"

"At Aunt Sarah's. That's it. I remember now. When Carol was a little girl, she always said that if Sarah got sick, she'd be happy to fly to Colorado to take care of her favorite aunt."

Karoline was shaking with excitement. Moody reached out gently and placed his fingers on her cheeks. He could feel the steady beat of her accelerating heart. "Listen," he said, "you and I and Preacher Blithe and everybody else in Cutler knows where Carol is. Why won't you admit it?" Moody tried to keep his words as tender as his hands.

She began bouncing up and down, rhythmically, as if repeatedly leaping over some invisible jump rope. Moody fought her, trying to calm her, but she wouldn't respond to his words or touch. Finally, unable to affect her, he picked her up, threw her over his shoulder like a sack of grain, and headed down the steps.

She began smacking his back with her balled-up hands, but he barely felt it. Despite her weight, he took long strides. His eyes clouded over with tears, making it hard to see where he was headed, but he kept going.

"I should have done this a long time ago," he announced, stepping through the still-open gate. He put her down. She turned away and faced their log cabin below. He put his hands on her shoulders and gently but firmly turned her around.

She brought her hands up over her eyes. "No," she screamed.

"Open your eyes and look," he demanded.

"I can't. I can't look at my own fault."

"It wasn't yours," he contradicted. "If it was anybody's, it was mine. I knew you were in fragile condition, but I went with the

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crew up to Frankfort to frame that house. My fault. Just because we were being paid a bonus."

Karoline fell to her knees, facing the stone. "You got sick so fast, Carol, I didn't know what to do."

"You did what any momma would do," Moody said, kneeling beside her. "You took care of her as best you knew how."

"I"—she sobbed—"I'd never seen a seizure before. I didn't know what to do. She was flopping all over that floor like she was holding onto a bare wire. She scratched me." Karoline rubbed her fingers along her left breast. "Scratched her own momma like she was some sort of cat. Carol, I am so sorry."

Moody pulled his wife of twenty-two years to his chest and held her tightly. He felt her heave and throe as though she were having a fit herself. He leaned back against the oak tree and sat there with his arms around her. Finally, when the afternoon shade covered them, she stopped shaking and began to sleep.

The next morning, Sunday, Karoline had gone off to the Wal-Mart. She had told him the earliest she would be back was about dark. It was inventory time again. Once again Moody had busied himself with little chores because he didn't want to look. He reglued the leg of a dining room chair his daddy had carved and his mother had caned with corn shuckings. Then he got ready for winter by splitting the hickory tree that had fallen in the spring. Finally, when his curiosity could no longer be contained, he mounted the stairs to the loft and opened the door.

Karoline had preserved Carol's room as if she were caretaker to a shrine. The bookcase was absolutely dust-free, and the white, ruffled curtains were spotless. Sitting on a shelf that he had built and hung over the bed was the doll collection. The brass on the four-poster bed gleamed in the late-morning light from where his wife periodically rubbed it. And now, thrown over the bed, was the large blue and white quilt Karoline had spent most of the spring and summer making.

In spite of himself, he sat down and began to cry. He should have known that taking his wife up to the family graveyard and making her face the truth would do no good. In his heart he had always doubted it would, and that was probably why he had put off for so long forcing her to confront the headstone. After months of therapy, the doctor in Lexington had answered his final question with, "These things take time. There is no timetable, no guarantees. Some, like you, seem to be able to move on after the death of a loved one. Others, like Karoline, may never recover."

That had been last winter. Carol had been dead for over a year. Moody had taken comfort in the other doctor's words that something had gone wrong in Carol's brain that no one but God could

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have known about. He had found solace in his everyday activities where words and places and smells would remind him of her short life. Even Joy Lynn. Twelve years, twelve short years was all the time he had been able to share with his only child.

Moody stood up and smoothed the quilt where he had been sitting. As the day before had shown him, Karoline's way of dealing with the death was different. The quilt, like the ritual cleaning of this room, had been a way of prolonging Carol's life. But until Saturday he hadn't realized the depth of his wife's denial. Karoline had actually created an elaborate story about Carol, wherein she finished high school and went on to college. Having her be the first in the Moody line to graduate had always been a family dream. Then a career in a big city. Yes, in her mind Karoline had accomplished all those things their daughter hadn't been able to.

Carefully Moody shut the door on his past, but not his memories.

Moody checked his watch just like he had the minute before. 1:44. He was sitting on the same rock where he had met Joy Lynn for almost six months. Every Sunday noon. Even when the big gully-washer had come that day in June, she'd been there. Atop the rock with a smile and anticipation. But not today.

Moody had to admit he was worried. She had told him that Papa Jim might have them leave before the corn was ready. Maybe they had pulled up stakes, left sometime during the past week while he was at work. Just headed someplace else for the fall and winter like the birds.

He started walking along the river in the direction she always came from. When he reached Bend Road, he started up it, approaching their property from the opposite direction he had that spring day. A deeper thought troubled him. He had seen new people move in before, but no matter how shy they were or how much they kept to themselves, sooner or later they got to know people at church, at PTA, somewhere. But other than Jason's brief appearance at the Marathon station, not this group. And what Joy Lynn had told him made no sense. They had planted corn. No one left a good corn crop in the ground and moved on. Corn could be harvested late into fall, and if by chance something was wrong with it, the corn always made good silage for cattle.

As Moody cut off of Bend Road so as to come in behind the old Forbes place, he had a good idea what he'd find, so he took his time and was careful about each step. These people were private for a purpose—and it didn't have anything to do with being antisocial. First came the NO HUNTING and POSTED signs of newly cut lumber and fresh paint. The first strand of piano wire, still

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gleaming in the afternoon sun, was easy to spot and avoid, but a razor blade got him.

Luckily the blade, attached to narrow-gauge wire, only grazed the back of his hand, and he wrapped his handkerchief around it to stop the bleeding. These people were determined not to let anyone close. Up ahead he heard Scarf bark. He tossed up a few leaves. At least he was downwind.

His eyes were so accustomed to searching at neck level that he never saw the tripwire, but the moment his boot made contact he felt the pressure. Quickly he looked off to the right, then the left. There was a box to his right. His boot's pressure had pulled the door open and out slithered several snakes. Timber rattlers. Luckily they had been in the box, not in the sun, and the coolness had rendered them slow.

Carefully he sidled left, glad he had worn his boots. The newcomers must have gone across the river into Estill County and trapped them some snakes. The Kentucky River provided a natural barrier. As long as he had lived in Clement County, he had seen eight-foot-long king snakes and a rat snake or two, but never rattlers or copperheads.

He was coming up behind the Forbes place now. He couldn't see anybody, but he heard talking from the front, toward the driveway he'd been on six months ago. When he reached the back of the house, he peered around to the front. Five of them—Papa Jim, the woman, and the three boys—were building a barrier at the top of the driveway. A wagon had been overturned and some fertilizer bags filled and piled on top of each other. To one side they were busy stacking logs. A boulder to the other side provided natural cover.

Quickly Moody began peering through the windows. In the old master bedroom, huddled next to the fireplace with an empty fertilizer bag pulled over her shoulders, was Joy Lynn. He tried to raise the window, but it was stuck. He tried the back-porch screen door. It opened with only a slight creak. He came through the back door and into the kitchen. From there he cut through the room old Matt Forbes had used for his office. The bedroom door was locked. Moody reached up by the transom and found a key still there.

He unlocked the bedroom door and opened it, still hearing the voices out front. A shotgun clicked open. As he stuck his head in the bedroom, he put his finger to his lips. Joy Lynn just stared at him as though she had never seen him before. He motioned her over. She just sat there.

"Where them sixteen-gauge shells?" came through a window.

Unwilling to wait, Moody crossed the room and picked the girl up. She didn't help or resist, but when he had her hoisted on his

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shoulder, her nails began to dig into his back. He left the bedroom and cut through the old study.

"I think they're inside," he thought he heard from the front.

"What are you doing?" the little girl whispered in his ear.

"Playing a game," he whispered back.

Moody started back the way he had come in, but giving the snake trap wide berth. He heard shouting from the house. Then a barking. He began to move faster, lengthening his stride while still carrying Joy Lynn.

"I'm scared," she confessed.

He started to say, "Me too," but caught himself.

Up ahead Moody spotted the road through the underbrush.

"I'm not sure I want to go with you," Joy Lynn said.

His heart jumped. "Why not?"

"Papa Jim and Clemily are all I got. They took—"

Her words were interrupted by a barking. Directly in front of them. Between them and the road. Scarf.

"Good dog, Scarf," said Joy Lynn, her voice close to panic.

Moody could see the dog wasn't wagging its tail. Its teeth were bared and it was panting loudly. He put the girl down behind him and quickly ripped off his belt. Then he took off his shirt and wrapped it around his arm. Once, when he was younger, he'd gotten this close to a coydog—half-coyote, half-dog—but his father'd been around to shoot the creature before it got closer.

Scarf charged them. Joy Lynn screamed. Moody crouched. The dog stopped suddenly and Moody couldn't figure out why. Between him and the dog was a timber rattler, now very much awake and close enough to take a piece out of either him or the dog.

Scarf twitched first. The rattler struck. The dog howled. Moody grabbed Joy Lynn and they hit Bend Road running. They crossed onto the other side, onto Moody property, and started up the edge. Sooner or later the pursuit would be after them. They forded Hines Creek, which ran from his springhouse.

When they had passed the driveway entrance, Moody asked, "What were you saying about Papa Jim and Clemily?"

She stopped and grabbed his hand. "My real parents, Ma and Pa, were kilt up in the mountains two years ago trying to protect the crop."

"You mean marijuana?" he said. Moody knew his suspicions had been right. The Forbes place, isolated and with rich land, was perfect. Grass growers often tried to hide the stuff in cornfields. Events of the past six months were starting to make sense. The privacy, the visitor in the fancy car, the gunfight.

"Yes. It was in the Daniel Boone forest, so they couldn't take our property away from us. Only some other people tried. A lot of shooting broke out. The five of us got away, and Papa Jim said he'd

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look after me since my pa had been such a loyal worker. But . . ."

"But what, honey?"

Tears hung in the corners of her eyes. "What do I do now?"

"You stick with me, honey." Moody squeezed her hand. "Something bad's about to happen here now."

"I know. Jason was talking. They heard some people from Detroit are mad at them and are coming to get what's theirs."

Just then Moody heard some vehicles coming down Bend Road. He pressed Joy Lynn down into the tall, unmowed grass and then ducked down himself. On the road he spotted several big trucks. As they passed, he saw Michigan license plates.

"Come on," he said, heading straight toward his log cabin. "We've got to call the state police."

Usually Moody loved the twilight. Things that bothered him during the day seemed to fade away, and the things that scared him in the night hadn't shown up yet. It was a time when nature was usually quiet, with the birds finished for the day and the nighttime chorus not yet in place. But this Sunday was different. He had called Trapp at the KSP barracks in Richmond. On telling the dispatcher it was an emergency, he'd been patched through to the post commander, who was already en route, having been given a tip that he might want to see what was growing at the old Forbes place.

"You'd best be careful," Moody had warned. "Those hillbillies haven't got much firepower, but I'd bet my farm those up-North drug dealers didn't come down here with no shotguns."

Down below in the valley, when the occasional firing was interrupted by long bursts, he knew he was right. If the army had taught him one thing years ago, it was respect for superior weaponry, especially automatic weapons. A few minutes later a green chopper touched down in his side yard, landing like an awkward praying mantis. A dozen men in full riot gear swarmed out the doors and headed toward the Forbes place.

Moody looked away from the living room window. On the couch beside him, Joy Lynn's little body heaved with deep sleep. He had cooked her two hamburgers, baked a potato, and fixed a green salad. When she was still hungry, he made her a milkshake with fresh strawberries. While she was eating, he noticed for the first time that her T-shirt was the same one she wore every Sunday. In Carol's room he had found a pair of jeans and a blue top that his daughter had liked to wear to her church youth group. The words "I Shall Fear No Evil" were still visible across the front. When Joy Lynn balled herself up in a fetal position, he went back upstairs, got the new quilt, and covered her.

Just after dark, when the area had grown quiet, he saw the

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headlights coming up the driveway. He closed the door behind him and went out onto the front porch. Trapp got out of the cruiser and took off a bulletproof vest that had blood on it. "You got a cold one?" he said. "I think I could use it."

As the helicopter was lifting off his property, Moody came back with two bottles of Miller Lite. Trapp finished his in almost a single gulp. Moody handed him the second beer. This time the trooper took a sip.

"Nine dead," said Trapp, looking down toward the Forbes place. "Five locals and four imports. Two of mine wounded." He took a larger sip. "Worst bloodbath I've seen since Desert Storm."

"That whole family gone?" Moody said.

"Four men and a woman. That's all there were, isn't it?"

Moody hesitated, listening to his heart beat. "Far as I know."

"We got three of that Detroit crew in custody. It seems your neighbors ambushed one of their mules last March, but instead of doing something about it then, these creeps waited till the marijuana was ready to harvest. Planned to come in here, kill them all, and take their crop."

"Awfully cold-blooded."

"My daddy used to say there was a type a man who was closer to animal than human being. I never truly knew what he meant till today." Trapp finished the beer. "I got some of my men camped out down there in case anybody else shows, vultures included. We'll be back tomorrow to haul those plants outta there to burn. My guess is, that crop might be worth close to seven or eight million dollars."

"Lotta money," Moody said.

"Someday, just once, I'd like to find out that men do things for reasons other than money." Trapp started to hand him the bottle, then stopped and hugged him. "All those years, I protected your butt. This time, you saved mine." He stepped back. "I owe you bigtime. If you hadn't called and given me a heads-up on what was really going down, I'd have walked in there naked and got myself killed."

Moody took the bottle from him.

Trapp started down the porch, then stopped and pivoted. "You need anything, ever, Riley, you let me know."

Moody said, "Hey, what are friends for?"

"Yeah," said the trooper.

"I'd do it again," said Moody, "even if there was money involved."

Moody went back inside, his mind exploding in sound. In the back of his head he heard his mother reminding him of the Moody Curse. Another voice was Karoline retelling her made-up story of Carol. Then Joy Lynn was saying, "What do I do now?"

He picked up the phone and dialed the recently released Carson

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Craft, who offered to do the job Moody wanted quick and cheap.

Then he re-covered Joy Lynn, who had kicked her quilt loose, and sat down to wait.

Sometime just after ten he heard Karoline's Toyota coming up the drive. She pulled in next to the F-150. Moody went outside and opened the car door for her.

"You startled me," she said, picking up a Wal-Mart bag.

"We had quite a ruckus around here," Moody said. "Just wanted to make sure you'd be okay."

"How sweet, Riley." She kissed him on the cheek.

He walked her up to the bottom step and said, "Wait here."

"Is it a surprise?" she said. "You know how I love surprises."

A minute later he opened the front door and brought Joy Lynn onto the porch. In the moth-covered front light, the sleepy-eyed little girl stood there in her bare feet wearing the new quilt like an oversized cape.

"Carol, you're back," said Karoline, dropping the Wal-Mart bag on the ground. She hurried up the steps and pulled the little girl into her.

Moody stepped off to the side.

Karoline led Joy Lynn into the house. "How was Aunt Sarah's? Did you like Colorado? Isn't flying wonderful?" Karoline stopped at the edge of the kitchen. "I'll fix us some hot chocolate like I always do, and you can tell me all about your summer."

As the woman disappeared into the kitchen, Joy Lynn turned around and held her hands out as if to ask, "What's going on?"

"We'll talk in the morning," Moody whispered. "In the meantime, just enjoy yourself."

Joy Lynn shrugged her shoulders and entered the bright kitchen.

Tomorrow, Moody decided, was time enough to tell Joy Lynn what had happened to Papa Jim and the others. Somehow, too, he'd have to explain about Karoline, about Carol, about the birth certificate and adoption papers Carson Craft was working on even now. Then the story about Aunt Sarah's death—yeah, how Karoline had a deal with her sister to raise her daughter if anything happened. He'd tell Cutler Elementary, on Tuesday, about Joy Lynn being home-schooled in Colorado. And he'd let the boys down at the Cutler Marathon know he wouldn't have as much free time as before.

Yeah, decided Moody, closing the front door, it was nice to have Trapp covering his backside, but the trooper had been wrong about one thing. Made-up stories weren't just better than the truth. Sometimes, for a good cause, made-up stories *were* the truth. ●

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COURIER AND IVES

by Edward D. Hoch

I guess I should begin by telling you my name is Walt Stanton. I was in the graduate program at Princeton when I first met Juliet Ives in a little study group we'd formed. At first I didn't notice anything special about her except that she was as tall as I was and had a way of twisting her long legs around like a pretzel when she was seated, unconsciously calling attention to them. She had a cute nose, full lips, and long brown hair, but it was those legs that everyone noticed first. One of the other guys in the study group referred to her as a "hottie," but the rest of us weren't so sure.

"I decided I should try a story with some younger characters," Edward D. Hoch told *EQMM* when he submitted "Courier and Ives." We don't know yet whether the young couple the story introduces will appear in further Hoch mysteries, but if they do they'll be following in the tradition of classic detecting duos such as Agatha Christie's Tommy and Tuppence. Their debut case takes them to London. ✝

Since we all used last names in the manner of college classmates, she became Ives to me and everyone else. Toward the end of our first year in graduate studies I even took Ives out a few times, usually for a beer after a particularly strenuous night of studying. One thing led to another, and by the time the spring semester had ended in May we'd managed to hook up. She announced quite boldly, "Stanton, I'm moving in with you."

"We'll see about that," I responded.

"What's more, I think we should go to Europe together this summer."

"What do you suggest we use for money?"

"That's for you to figure out. I'll work on the itinerary."

I hadn't known Ives for all that long, but I was well aware that once she decided on something it was as good as done. We were going to Europe that summer. I started scanning the papers for bargains on airline tickets, and that was how I learned about the

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courier service.

It seems there are companies that supply airline tickets for forty to eighty-five percent off the regular fare—and sometimes for free—if the passenger agrees to escort packages overseas. I decided it was something that was worth checking into, so I phoned the number in the ad and made an appointment for the following morning to see Andrew Kogan at Air Couriers International. His office on lower Fifth Avenue was small and unimposing, but a middle-aged secretary at work on a computer made it seem legitimate enough.

Kogan himself was a nervous man in his late forties who wore glasses and a bad hairpiece and looked like somebody's father. "I need to ask you a few questions first. Then I'll tell you a bit about the job. It's nothing very complicated. Age?"

"Twenty-three."

"Occupation?"

"Graduate student. I'm off for the summer."

"Do you have a valid passport?"

"Yes."

"Married?"

"No."

"Living alone?"

"I have a girlfriend."

"Will she be traveling with you?"

"Yes, if it can be arranged."

"She would have to pay the regular fare. This job calls for only one escort. But if you could leave on Saturday we would supply a free round-trip fare for yourself, and might be able to throw in three nights at a London hotel and some spending money."

That was the best news I'd heard. "It would have to be London?"

Andrew Kogan nodded. "Since the terrorist attacks last September the government has limited courier routes to London and the Far East."

"Would we have to return after three days?"

"Not at all. You could stay from a few days to six months. And you may keep any frequent-flier miles you earn."

"Who do I have to kill for this?" I asked with a grin.

Kogan was not amused. "You would merely have to give up a portion of your checked-baggage allowance on the flight. You see, Mr. Stanton, some companies need to ship documents, computer gadgets, and other items abroad by the fastest means possible, as checked luggage. Packages shipped as air cargo can sit at an airport for days waiting to be cleared through customs."

"What will I be transporting?"

"You don't need to know because you'll only see the package for a few minutes while you're checking in. Everything else is our

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responsibility. You will arrive at the airport three hours before flight time and you'll be met by my secretary, Miss Gordon. She will hand you your ticket and help you check in. At Heathrow, in London, you will be met by another of my employees. Give him your baggage check for our parcel, along with the manifest we'll supply, and go on your way. Is that simple enough?"

"Sounds like it."

"Good! Then you'll fly to London on Saturday."

"Yes," I agreed, knowing Ives would be pleased.

"I'll have Miss Gordon draw up a simple contract for your signature. When she meets you at the airport she will give you your ticket along with the hotel voucher and a hundred pounds in cash."

I could barely contain myself when I told Ives the good news about my meeting with Andrew Kogan. "A free trip to London and three nights at a hotel! Who would have believed it? You do have a passport, don't you?"

"Sure. I told you my folks took me to Paris the summer I graduated. But where do I get the money for my ticket? I hate to put too much on my credit card."

I pulled the envelope out of my pocket. "I bought it for you on my way home. Now we're really broke, but at least we'll be on our way to London on Saturday."

She gave me her best grin. "And as a team."

"Team?"

"Sure! Courier and Ives!"

Saturday was warm and sunny, a perfect day for flying, and we arrived at JFK promptly at nine o'clock for our noon flight on one of the discount airlines. With the five-hour time difference it would be nearly midnight by the time we landed in London and cleared customs, but we were both night people anyway and it would be fun roaming the city for a bit before turning in.

Miss Gordon, Kogan's secretary, was waiting for us at the ticket counter. A cardboard box about nine inches square rested by her feet. "You're right on time," she said, all business. "Here are your ticket, manifest, and the hotel voucher for three nights, plus a hundred pounds in British currency."

"Thank you. This is my traveling companion, Juliet Ives."

"Hello, Juliet. I'm Martha Gordon."

I picked up the package and was surprised by its weight. "What's in here? A bowling ball?"

"The manifest simply says computer equipment. You know as much as I do. It's addressed to a Mr. Leo Nevsky in London, and he's the one who will meet you there."

Ives and I were making do with a single checked suitcase plus

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our carry-ons, to stay beneath the weight limit. Our cargo weighed just sixteen pounds so there was no problem. "That's it?" I asked Miss Gordon.

"That's it. You won't see it again. Give this baggage check for the parcel to the man who meets you at Heathrow, along with the manifest."

"No problem."

Ives had already moved a few steps away, anxious to visit some of the airport shops. "Enjoy yourself," Miss Gordon said. Then she dropped her voice a bit and added, "Be careful. I shouldn't be telling you this, but our last courier on the London route was killed over there."

"Killed? You mean in a traffic accident?"

"He was murdered, Mr. Stanton."

I decided not to mention that to Ives, but the memory of the secretary's words stayed with me as we flew across the Atlantic.

The burly man who met us at the huge baggage-claim room at the international arrivals building was neither British nor American. He seemed to speak English with a Russian accent, if I could trust my knowledge of Russian gained from American movies. "You are Walter Stanton?" he asked, showing me an identification card from Air Couriers International. He held his thumb conveniently over the photo ID.

"That's me. And you are Leo Nevsky?" I asked, reading the name off the ID.

"Correct. Do you have the baggage check for my parcel?"

Something was not quite right. I didn't like the whole thing. "Right here," I said, handing over one of the checks along with the manifest in its sealed envelope. "Good doing business with you."

I hurried away to the other side of the large baggage carousel. When I saw the square box come down the chute I grabbed it and walked over to where Ives was waiting. "What's that?" she asked.

"The parcel. I don't trust that guy. He looks like a Russian mobster and I think he was using somebody else's ID. I gave him the baggage check for our bag."

"You what?"

"Let's get out of here before he comes looking for me." We passed through customs and casually looked the other way while our parcel went through the X-ray machine without incident. Then we hurried out to the taxi stand.

In the taxi to our hotel I tried to explain. "All the stuff we really need is in our carry-ons. The suitcase was mostly for things we might buy."

"What about my one good dress?"

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"I'll buy you another," I promised.

She kicked the box at our feet. "And what are we going to do with this?"

"As soon as we get to the hotel I'll phone Kogan in New York and tell him what I did."

"It's Saturday night in New York. And tomorrow is Sunday. He won't be in his office till Monday morning, about two in the afternoon, London time."

I hadn't thought of that. "We'll work something out."

"That Russian mobster is going to be plenty upset about now."

"Yeah," I agreed, remembering what Miss Gordon had told me at the airport. "I'm hoping he doesn't know where we're staying."

I was dismayed to discover that the taxi to the hotel took a large bite out of the hundred pounds Miss Gordon had given me at JFK. "I think there's a subway from the airport," Ives told me. "It would have been lots cheaper."

"It's not a subway over here," I corrected her. "It's the Underground."

"Whatever."

We checked into the small hotel on one of the back streets off Piccadilly and went immediately to our room on the third floor. Ives unpacked her meager belongings, still upset at the loss of her dress. "We should at least open up the box," she told me. "Maybe there's a dress inside."

"It's a bit heavy for a dress. And the wrong shape."

"Go ahead, open it!" she dared me.

She sat cross-legged on the bed with the square box before her, and after some ale and sandwiches from room service I searched around till I found a letter opener in one of the drawers. I used it to cut the tape and open the box, pulling aside the bubble-wrap packing.

My first guess had been right. It was a bowling ball.

Later, around nine in the morning, I got up and searched for a cigarette, then remembered I'd quit smoking a month ago. "You could kill a guy with those legs, Ives."

She chuckled and sat up. "I've come close, once or twice."

I opened the drapes and stared out at a cloudy Sunday morning in London town. "Looks like it might rain."

"It often looks that way in London."

"Were you here before?"

"With my folks when we came to Paris. The chunnel had just opened and we came by train."

"Well, let's have breakfast and go out on the town."

"Stanton."

"Yes?"

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"What about the bowling ball? You're just ignoring the whole thing."

"I examined it pretty close, even putting my fingers in the holes and feeling for a hidden button or something. It's just an ordinary bowling ball. There's nothing we can do until tomorrow when I phone Kogan in New York."

The telephone by the bed surprised us with a ring. Ives reached for it and then decided I should answer it. "Hello?" I said cautiously.

It was someone at the front desk. "A woman named Dulwich is here to see you, sir. She says she's come about a package."

I felt a sudden thrill of fear. "Is she alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"May I speak to her?"

A woman's voice came on, speaking with an English accent. "Is this Mr. Stanton?"

"It is. And who are you?"

"Lisa Dulwich. I've come for the parcel."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"The courier parcel you flew over from New York last night."

I glanced over at the bowling ball, still in its box. "Perhaps you'd better come up. We're in Room 325." I hung up and told Ives, "Throw on some clothes. She's on her way up for the parcel."

"Who is?"

"Beats me. A woman named Lisa Dulwich." I slipped on the shirt and pants I'd worn on the flight, wishing I'd had time to shower, and tossed the end of a blanket over the box.

There was a knock on the door and I opened it to admit a small, slender woman with curly black hair, probably in her thirties. She was wearing a loose-fitting jacket and had one hand in the pocket. I couldn't help noticing she carried our suitcase in her other hand. She introduced herself and glanced at Ives, who was half hidden behind the bathroom door. "I've come for the parcel," she said again.

"A man named Nevsky met me at the airport last night," I told her.

"And you gave him the wrong baggage check." She dropped our suitcase on the floor.

"Yeah. That was a foolish mistake."

"Foolish for you, perhaps, but fortunate for us. Nevsky wasn't Nevsky. The man who met you stole his identification. I believe he's a man named Skoveenly."

"He did act a bit suspicious," I agreed. "I was on my guard because someone told me the courier before me was killed here."

She nodded. "That would have been the Southern boy, Billy Joe Frazier. Very naive. Kogan should never have sent him. I trust you

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have a few more brains than that."

"What happened to him?"

But she merely shook her head. "I never waste time with the past. Do you have the parcel?"

"I want some information first. I want to know what I'm involved in here."

Ives came out of the bathroom, fully dressed now in sandals, jeans, and a blouse. "Hi," she greeted us casually. "What's up?"

I introduced her to Lisa Dulwich, who seemed a bit intimidated. Ives can have that effect on people. "I've come for the parcel," she said, holding her ground.

"You'll have to identify it," Ives told her. "Describe what's in it."

"You mean you've opened it?"

"We had to, didn't we? Trying to find out who it belonged to?"

"Nevsky's name was on the label."

"But Nevsky, real or false, was the man at the airport," I reminded her, jumping into the conversation. "He's the one we didn't think should have it."

"We're wasting time here," she said. "Give me the parcel, please."

"What happens if we don't?" Ives wanted to know.

Lisa Dulwich removed her hand from the jacket pocket. It was holding a tiny automatic pistol. "Then I'll have to shoot you."

Ives looked over at me. "I guess we'd better do what she says." Then, to the Englishwoman, "It's in the box under that blanket."

Keeping the gun pointed in our direction, Dulwich stepped onto the blanket and lifted the part covering the parcel. That was when Ives yanked the end of the blanket still on the bed. The slender woman flipped over and her weapon spun through the air. I retrieved it before she knew what had happened.

Sometimes Ives is a good person to have along.

"Now we want some answers," I told Dulwich. "Stay right there on the floor and tell us what this is all about."

She rolled over and sat up, her face white. "You two are making a big mistake. We're not playing games here."

"Let's begin with my predecessor, the one who was murdered. What happened to him?"

"Frazier was a young American lad like you," she said. "He failed to meet Leo at Heathrow and was killed in his hotel room the day after his arrival."

I knew enough about guns to remove the clip from her little automatic and eject the cartridge from the chamber before tossing it on the floor near her. "Did you shoot him, too?"

"I didn't shoot him, and I wouldn't have shot you. As a matter of fact, he was stabbed. I suppose Leo killed him, but it might have been Skoveenly."

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"How are you and Leo Nevsky tied together?"

"We both work for Air Couriers International. He receives these courier deliveries from the States and then transships them elsewhere."

"What's the purpose of that?" Ives asked her.

The woman hesitated before answering, then said, "There are some supercomputers and parts that are embargoed by your government. They can be shipped here to Britain and other friendly nations but not to certain Middle Eastern countries. Everyone knows these transshipments take place, but your government is not pleased about it. They try to stop it when they can."

"And Frazier decided to keep the parcel for his own gain?"

"Apparently. The contents are insured, of course, but the courier company's reputation suffers if its deliveries go astray. We couldn't allow that to happen a second time."

"Hardly a good reason for killing someone," I told her.

"Talk to Leo about that, not me."

"Who's this other man, Skoveenly, that you mentioned?"

She sighed, obviously wishing she were somewhere else. "I met him with Nevsky a few months back, at a riverside pub called the Silver Drake, over near Canary Wharf. Leo and I aren't really friends, but sometimes I meet him for a drink to talk about the courier business. We work for other companies besides Air Courier International. Anyway, Leo and Skoveenly had mutual friends back in Eastern Europe, and Skoveenly looked Leo up in London. From the beginning there was something about him I didn't trust. Leo continued to see him but I avoided him. A few days ago Leo admitted to me that one night when they were out drinking he told Skoveenly about the courier shipments. They look a bit alike, and Skoveenly stole Leo's company ID. I don't know what happened after that. Suddenly the courier, Billy Joe Frazier, was dead in his hotel room. Leo thinks that Skoveenly killed him but I don't know what to believe. I came here for the parcel to save your life. You can believe that or not."

"Give her the parcel and let's be done with it," Ives suggested.

It sounded like the easiest solution. "All right." I pushed the box over to her. "It's all yours."

Lisa Dulwich looked at the box and then at me. "What's this?"

"It seems to be a bowling ball."

She checked the address label on the package. "There must be some mistake."

"That's a fine thing to tell me after I flew across the ocean with it."

"This is what Andrew Kogan gave you to deliver?"

"Well, his secretary met me at the airport with it."

"Martha Gordon?"

"I think that's her name."

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Dulwich thought about that. "Give me back my gun."

"It's there. Take it."

"And the clip."

I unloaded the clip before passing it to her. "Should I seal up the box for you?"

"The bowling ball? You can keep it." She made a hasty retreat from our room.

"At least I got my dress back," Ives said, shaking out the fancy green and gold creation and putting it on one of the closet hangers. "And I hope we've seen the last of those people. Maybe we can go off and enjoy the city now."

"What should we do with the bowling ball?"

"Leave it in the closet for now," she decided. "We'll worry about it later."

The sun had finally broken through the morning clouds, holding the promise of a halfway decent day, and we walked up to Piccadilly Circus. "We need some breakfast," I said. My stomach was starting to growl.

"It's nearly noon. Where can we find it now?"

We kept walking and finally found a place that supplied bacon and eggs at a reasonable price. From there we wandered across St. James's Park to the river. It was after three when Ives suggested we take a boat ride from Westminster to the Tower of London. It seemed like a good way to spend a few hours and I was lining up for tickets when I spotted a woman wearing sunglasses who looked familiar. "What is it?" Ives asked, seeing my expression.

"I think we're being followed."

I slipped out of the line and hurried up the steps to Westminster Bridge opposite Big Ben. The woman saw me coming and turned away, but I tapped her on the arm. "Imagine running into you in London, Miss Gordon!"

Kogan's secretary turned sharply, as if to deny it, but then thought better of it. "Hello, Mr. Stanton. Are you enjoying your stay?"

"I was until now. Have you been following us?"

"I happened to spot you in the street and thought I'd see where you were going."

"What are you doing in London? I saw you in New York just yesterday."

"My employer decided on a sudden trip here. We flew over last night."

"Kogan is here, too?"

"That's right. We're at the Grosvenor House. Did you deliver the parcel?"

"I gave the baggage check to your man at Heathrow."

"Good. Are you enjoying your stay in London?"

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I gave her a smile. "The first day, anyhow. My friend and I were thinking about a boat ride to the Tower of London."

She peered at her watch. "It closes at five. You'd best wait till tomorrow for that. Look, I'm meeting Mr. Kogan for drinks back at our hotel in half an hour. Why don't you two come along?"

I wasn't anxious to spend time in their company, but I was curious about the whole business. I'd gotten myself involved in something and I could only hope that Ives and I hadn't innocently violated any American laws. "I'll go ask her," I said, and retreated down the steps to the dock area where Ives was waiting.

"What's all that about?" she asked, looking up at Martha Gordon. "Isn't she a bit old for you?"

"You don't recognize her with the sunglasses. That's Miss Gordon, Kogan's secretary. Remember? She gave me the parcel at JFK."

"What's she doing here?"

"Following us, I think. She claims she flew over with her boss last night, wants us to have drinks with them now."

"What about the boat ride?"

"The Tower closes at five. She suggested we see it tomorrow."

Ives gave a sigh. "What have you gotten us into, Stanton?"

"I wish I knew."

Tea was being served in the lounge at Grosvenor House when we arrived around four o'clock, but that hadn't dissuaded Andrew Kogan from ordering a whiskey and soda. "Good to see you again, fella," he said, rising to shake my hand. I wondered if he'd forgotten my name already. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," I lied. "No problem."

He signaled the waitress and I ordered whiskey, too, surprised when Ives chose tea. "My trip was completely unexpected," he explained. "Miss Gordon and I flew over last night. I have a meeting tomorrow morning and then we'll be going back."

I wondered if I should mention Nevsky and Lisa Dulwich, then decided it was better not to bring them up. Nor my predecessor, Billy Joe Frazier, for that matter. "Might you have any more courier jobs later in the year?" I asked.

"We schedule them almost every weekend. You and your lady could probably do as many as you want."

"We have to be back in graduate school for the fall semester," Ives told him.

"Then pass our name on to your friends." He raised his glass to me. "Cheers!"

After a sip of my own drink I said, "I still don't understand all the details of this courier business. The only name on the parcel was this fellow Leo Nevsky who met me at Heathrow. Was he the recipient?"

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Kogan smiled. "Once it's delivered to him it's out of our hands. We don't really care what he does with it."

"I only held it for a minute, until it was checked on the flight. But it was heavy. It felt like a bowling ball."

If I'd expected his expression to change, I was disappointed. "The company that shipped it makes all sorts of computer devices," he replied. "I never know what they'll come up with next."

"So are you two going on from London?" Martha Gordon asked, conveniently changing the subject.

"We'd love to stay in Europe for the summer," Ives told them, "but we can't afford it. When the money runs out, we'll be heading home."

"That'll be about Tuesday," I said with a laugh.

We chatted amiably for another twenty minutes, mostly about London, but when Kogan suggested a second round I begged off. Ives and I left and headed back to our hotel. "That was fun," she told me. "You think those two are sleeping together?"

"I don't know why else he would have brought her."

We chuckled a bit on the way back, trying to imagine it, but in the lobby of the hotel our high spirits suddenly dampened. A tall middle-aged man in a dark suit was standing by the desk, and when the room clerk pointed us out he intercepted us on the way to the elevator.

"Pardon me, sir. Would you be Mr. Walter Stanton?"

"That's me."

He opened his wallet and showed me his identification. "I'm Deputy Inspector Ronald Hume, sir, investigating a homicide. We have reason to believe you were acquainted with the deceased. Can we sit over there and talk?"

I glanced at Ives and I think in that instant we both wished we'd stayed in New York. We followed him to some chairs at the far end of the lobby. I introduced Ives and we sat down. "Who was killed?"

"Man named Leo Nevsky." Hume had taken out a notebook and pen. "He was found dead in a car near Lambeth Bridge. He had your name and hotel on a piece of paper in his pocket."

"When did this happen?"

"A passerby found the body shortly after noon today. He hadn't been dead long."

"Was he shot?" I asked, trying to remember what time Lisa Dulwich left our room with her unloaded gun.

"Stabbed. Took a knife right between the ribs, straight to the heart, apparently from someone sitting with him in the car. What do you know about it, sir?"

"Next to nothing." I explained about the courier run that got me a free plane ticket. "This man Nevsky met me at Heathrow when we landed shortly before midnight last night."

"You delivered the parcel to him?"

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"I gave him the claim check for it." There seemed no reason for complicating things by going into detail.

"Did you see him again after that?"

"No. We came directly here, had a bite to eat, and went to bed."

"What time did you go out this morning?"

"It must have been close to noon. I remember we had trouble finding a place still serving breakfast."

"And you saw nothing more of Leo Nevsky?"

"No."

He flipped over a page of his notebook. "What was your impression of him when he met you at the airport?"

"Sort of thuggish, possibly Russian. I only saw him for a minute."

He showed me an autopsy photo of the dead man. "Is this the person you met?"

"It looks like him but I can't be sure. Like I said, I only saw him for a minute."

He turned his attention to Ives. "What did you think, miss?"

"I never saw him. I was waiting outside the baggage-claim area."

"And no one was with him?"

"He was alone," I answered.

"Who hired you for this courier job?"

"A man in New York named Andrew Kogan. The company is called Air Couriers International." I didn't bother to mention that Kogan was in London, too.

He nodded, closing the notebook. "We may need to interview you again. How long will you be here?"

"Our room is paid until Tuesday. After that, I don't know."

He handed me his card. "Check with me before you leave."

I promised to call him and he left us in the lobby. "What have we gotten ourselves into?" Ives wanted to know. "Does he think we might have killed that man?"

We went up to our room and found a message from Lisa Dulwich awaiting us. She asked that I phone her as soon as possible. I dialed the number and she answered at once. "This is Stanton. You called my hotel."

"Leo Nevsky has been murdered," she said quickly. "I just heard it on the evening news."

"I know. We've already had a deputy inspector here questioning us. Any idea who did it?"

"It could be Skoveenly, the man who met you at the airport. When he didn't get the right package he must have thought Nevsky had beaten him to it." She cut the conversation short. "I must go now. Be careful."

I hung up and relayed her warning to Ives. "I'm starting to feel as if I'm trapped in a detective story. We've got two murders and a

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bevy of suspects. Lisa Dulwich is stalking around the city with a gun, Andrew Kogan and his secretary conveniently flew over from New York just in time to be here for Nevsky's murder, and then there's this mysterious Skoveenly character, the one who met me at the airport."

Ives shook her head, dazed by it all. "The trouble with most detective stories is that the solution takes up so much space. Writers should be able to untangle it all and point out the killer in one sentence."

"Maybe you should get a job as an editor," I suggested.

She took her dress out of the closet. "Where are we going for dinner? Someplace dressy, I hope."

"There are some fancy hotels along Park Lane, but I don't know if we can afford any of them."

"I've still got my American Express card. I guess I can go for one special dinner."

"Good for you," I replied sourly. "How do we pay it off?"

"I'll worry about that next month."

I phoned a couple of the hotels and we decided on the Dorchester, just a few blocks down the street. As soon as I saw the menu prices I knew it was a mistake, but Ives didn't seem to mind. "It's your birthday present," she told me.

"My birthday's not till August."

"Then you're ahead of the game. I think I'll have a lobster."

I ordered the Dover sole and a bottle of white wine. By the time we finished dinner I was afraid to look at the check. Ives scooped it up without letting me see it.

"This dinner cost a small fortune!" I objected.

"Tell you what we'll do. We'll solve the mystery and blackmail the killer into paying for our dinner."

"You're one crazy girl."

On the way back to our hotel we decided to avoid Park Lane and meander through the narrow streets with names like South Audley and Aldford. It was on one of these that disaster almost overtook us. Ives was crossing the street just ahead of me when a dark sedan seemed to emerge from nowhere, pinning her with its headlights. I had only an instant to grab for her sleeve, yanking her back as the vehicle sideswiped her. Then we both toppled over as the car kept on going.

I helped Ives up, brushing the dirt from her dress. "It's ripped!" she announced, holding up a sleeve for me to see.

"Maybe that can be fixed," I said. "Did you get a look at the driver?"

"He had a cap on. I couldn't see his face."

"If it was this Skoveenly he must have been following us, waiting for his chance."

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"Maybe it was just some drunk," she said, but I knew she didn't believe it.

On Monday morning I decided it might be a good idea to have lunch at the pub Lisa Dulwich had mentioned, the Silver Drake. "Just to see if Skoveenly is around."

Ives was dubious. "Isn't that like putting your head in the lion's mouth?"

"If he's trying to kill us, let's have it out with him. I don't want to be looking over my shoulder every time we go out after dark."

The Silver Drake wasn't what I'd expected of a waterfront pub. Rather than seamen off the cargo ships, its lunch business consisted mainly of men and women in business suits from the nearby Canary Wharf office tower, the tallest in London. I asked the waitress if she knew a man named Skoveenly, possibly from Eastern Europe, but she didn't. "I just work lunches. He sounds more the evening type."

After a leisurely lunch Ives and I took a taxi to the Tower of London, spending a fascinating couple of hours wandering with the ravens and exploring the Bloody Tower, the armories, and the museum. Ives especially enjoyed the Jewel House with the Crown Jewels on view. We had planned to take the boat back to Westminster dock, but it was already late afternoon and I suggested we stroll around a bit and head back to the pub in hopes of getting a line on Skoveenly.

The bar was more crowded than at noon, but there were fewer people dining. We found a waitress who was folding napkins and asked her about Skoveenly. "Don't know anyone by that name," she told us. "Can't be a regular."

"How about Leo Nevsky?"

"The bloke that was killed yesterday? Are you police?"

"Do we sound like it with these American accents?" Ives asked. "We're just trying to find this man Skoveenly."

"I knew Leo. Sorry to hear about his death. He was a good tipper. He had lots of friends, some of them Arabs, but I don't remember anyone named Skoveenly."

"Eastern European?" I described the man who'd met me at the airport.

"That description could fit half of our customers, even Leo. You don't have a picture, do you?"

"No," I admitted. "Could you ask the other girls if they know him?"

"Sure."

She came back about ten minutes later and said no one had ever heard of him. I gave her a tip, but probably not as much as Leo had left. Our money was running low so we settled for a movie in Leicester Square before heading back to our hotel. We stayed on

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the well-lit main streets and had no close calls. Perhaps Sunday night's near miss had been only an accident after all.

On Tuesday morning, just as I was thinking we were out of the woods, we received an early call from Deputy Inspector Hume. I first thought he was merely checking to make sure we were still in town, but then he said, "We are holding an individual in connection with our investigation, Mr. Stanton. Due to these new developments we are coordinating with Scotland Yard. That's where I'm calling from now. It would greatly assist us if you and Miss Ives could come down here this morning. We could send a car for you in an hour if that would be convenient."

It seemed I had little choice in the matter. "We'll be downstairs by ten o'clock," I told him and hung up.

Ives rolled over on the bed, her eyes still closed against the morning light. "Who's calling us at this ungodly hour?"

"Get up. It's almost nine and they're picking us up at ten."

"Who is?"

"DI Hume has arranged a visit to Scotland Yard for us. I couldn't say no."

"Stanton—"

"Something's come up. I don't know what."

"Can't we just sneak out the back door?"

"Wouldn't be wise. I don't think they'll arrest us if we go down there. Come on! Get dressed and we'll grab a quick breakfast."

"I have to shower first. Do you think I'm going to Scotland Yard smelling like this?"

Ives insisted on wearing her ripped dress, to show them what had happened. We made it downstairs with fifteen minutes to spare, time enough for a quick Bath bun and coffee. Then we met the police car at the front entrance, as ready as we'd ever be.

DI Hume met us in the downstairs lobby of New Scotland Yard and escorted us to the fourth floor. "What's this all about?" I asked him.

"You'll find out soon enough. It's Scotland Yard's case now."

Upstairs he introduced us to Detective Inspector Sharker, then left us alone. Sharker looked old enough and mean enough to be my grandfather, with deep frown lines that cut across his forehead. He shook my hand and said, "I understand you are an employee of Air Couriers International, Mr. Stanton."

"I made one trip for them, to earn free airfare from New York and back."

"Were you advised of what you were carrying?"

"No."

"At any time during or after your flight, did you become aware of what you were carrying?"

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"Yes. It was a bowling ball. We still have it in our room."

"A bowling ball? Why didn't you give this information to DI Hume?"

Ives spoke up. "Because he's not as intimidating as you are."

Inspector Sharker studied her for a moment. "You have a quick mouth, young lady." He walked over and opened a door. "Step this way, please, both of you."

I followed Ives into the inner office and found Andrew Kogan seated uncomfortably in a chair, looking as if he were awaiting his own execution. "What are you two doing here?" he asked when he saw us.

"I'll do the questioning if you don't mind, sir," the inspector told him. Then to us he said, "Mr. Kogan is being questioned regarding a shipment of highly sophisticated computer chips which he brought into the country from America yesterday and attempted to transship to Iraq this morning in the luggage of his personal secretary, Miss Martha Gordon. As you may know, such shipments from your country to Iraq are embargoed at the present time."

The whole thing, or most of it, was suddenly clear to me. "You hired me as a decoy," I told Kogan. "The previous courier was killed, probably when he tried to keep a man named Skoveenly from stealing the parcel. So you sent me over here with a bowling ball while you followed on Saturday night with the real shipment. The idea was that while Skoveenly puzzled over the bowling ball you could slip into the country and send Miss Gordon on her way with the real parcel."

Kogan glared at me. "Shut your mouth! Don't you understand you're in this as deep as I am?"

"No, he's not!" Ives leaped to my defense. "He kept the bowling ball because he was suspicious of the man who met him at Heathrow. And someone tried to run us down with a car last night. Look at my ripped sleeve!"

The inspector was losing his patience. "We've had two murders in two weeks, and I intend to get to the bottom of this business. Violating the embargo is a serious matter, though not quite so serious as murder."

I was wondering what had happened to Deputy Inspector Hume, but he suddenly reappeared, holding out a sheet of paper for the inspector. Sharker scanned it quickly, then did a slower second read. He seemed pleased, and for the first time the frown lines on his forehead seemed to relax a bit. He turned to Kogan. "Your secretary, Miss Gordon, has made a full statement. She mentions Nevsky and a woman named Lisa Dulwich as your employees in London. Where can we find the Dulwich woman?"

Kogan saw he had little choice. He scrawled her address on a

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pad and turned it over to the inspector, who passed it along to Hume. "Bring her in for questioning."

"May we go now?" Ives asked.

He looked at her as if she must be crazy. "No, dear girl. Not for some time yet."

Lisa Dulwich was brought in and questioned separately. She told the police about the man named Skoveenly who, she was sure, had impersonated Nevsky in an attempt to steal the shipments of computer chips bound for Iraq. "She's convinced Skoveenly killed Frazier, your earlier courier, and then Nevsky," Inspector Sharker told Kogan.

"How would he have known about my couriers and when they'd arrive?" Kogan asked.

"According to her, Nevsky told him one night when they'd been drinking. Skoveenly looked enough like him to pull it off, especially with Nevsky's identification in his possession."

"Let me talk to her. You can stay right in the room and listen to everything I say."

"Well, that's good of you, Mr. Kogan," Sharker said, barely concealing the sarcasm in his voice. He signaled to Hume. "Bring her in, and Miss Gordon, too."

Ives poked me with her elbow and said under her breath, "Hey, it's like an old Charlie Chan movie, with all the suspects together in one room."

"You're forgetting the missing Mr. Skoveenly," I whispered back.

Lisa Dulwich took one look at Ives and managed to steer clear of her, circling to a chair at the far end of the table. Martha Gordon also seemed shy, avoiding her employer's efforts to catch her eye. It was Kogan who spoke first. "Miss Gordon and I couldn't possibly be implicated in the first murder. We were in New York at the time."

Sharker gave him a sour look. "You've demonstrated this weekend just how fast you can get over here if you want to, Mr. Kogan. You thought that by shipping those computer chips by regular courier service, quite familiar to the airlines, you could pass them quickly through customs and transship them elsewhere without attracting suspicion." He shifted his attention to Lisa Dulwich while he scanned her statement. "Suppose you tell us again about this man Skoveenly."

She sighed. "I met him with Nevsky a couple of months back. They were both from Eastern Europe and had mutual friends there. From the beginning there was something about him I didn't trust. I know Nevsky continued to see him, but I avoided him. A few days ago Nevsky admitted to me that one night when they were drinking he told Skoveenly about the courier shipments. They looked a bit alike and Skoveenly stole his ID and tried to

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intercept last week's parcel. When Frazer, the courier, became suspicious, Skoveenly killed him. This week, when things went bad, Skoveenly must have killed Nevsky, too."

"Where can we find this man Skoveenly?" Inspector Sharker wanted to know.

"I have no idea. I haven't seen him in weeks."

I raised my hand timidly, like an uncertain schoolchild. "Ives and I spent yesterday looking for him, but we couldn't find a trace."

"Oh," Sharker said, eyeing the two of us. "Perhaps we should put you on the payroll."

"Perhaps you should," Ives agreed. "We could solve this case for you in under a minute."

"By confessing?" the Scotland Yard man asked with a smirk.

"No, by pointing out one big glaring clue that Stanton and I knew about even if you didn't."

"What would that be?" the inspector asked, his voice barely a whisper. Every eye in the room was on Ives now.

"My dress, of course!" She held up the torn sleeve. "You see, it was in our checked bag that Lisa Dulwich brought to our hotel room Sunday morning. She claimed not to have seen either Skoveenly or Nevsky for several days, but she had to have seen the one who met us at the airport or how could she have come into possession of the bag? There's no evidence Skoveenly ever existed, and the name is an anagram for Leo Nevsky. It was Nevsky who met Stanton at Heathrow, and when he got the wrong parcel, he sent Lisa to our hotel to get the real one. All she found was a bowling ball, and when she and Nevsky argued about whose fault it was, she must have stabbed him. We don't know that she killed Frazier a week earlier, but the murder method was the same, so it's likely she did. She tried to run us down with her car Sunday night, too, to keep the fictional menace of Skoveenly alive."

Lisa Dulwich was on her feet, rushing toward Ives before any of us could stop her. Ives bopped her on the nose, and it was over.

"Your solution took more than one sentence," I reminded Ives later.

"Not much more."

Dulwich confessed to both murders. Kogan and his secretary were being held while an investigation continued into violations of the American embargo. Ives and I paid for an extra day in London and made arrangements to fly home on Wednesday.

"I'd like to see more of Europe," she said in bed that night. "Maybe they'll give us a reward."

"Don't count on it."

"Is this the end of Courier and Ives, then?"

"Not the end. More like the climax." ●

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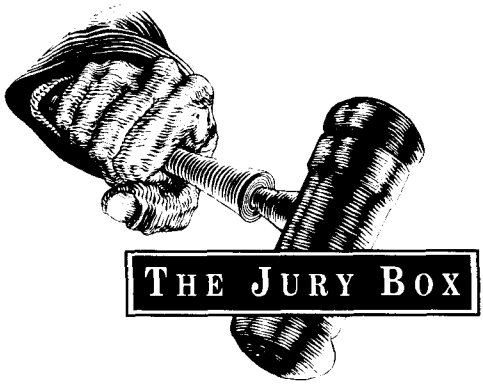

by Jon L. Breen

Why are more and more writers taking up the 20th-century historical? It may be the appeal of a simpler, less frenzied time, a time of less ambiguous morality and greater innocence, when detective work was simpler (if harder) before the days of computer networks, cell phones, and DNA—and yet a time close enough to be recognizable in its language, values, and concerns. The 20th-century historical may require less intensive research than one set in centuries far past. But doing it well is harder than it looks: anachronisms are easier to commit but (paradoxically) more likely to be spotted by the reader with a good ear and a long memory. Below are some recent examples, demonstrating a wide variety of styles, approaches, locales, and levels of achievement.

*** Barbara Cleverly: *The Last Kashmiri Rose,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24. Set in 1922 India, in the waning days of the British Raj, this first novel won the Crime Writers Association's Debut Dagger Award. The background is expertly depicted, the characters complex and individual, and the intriguing problem—the seemingly accidental death of a British officer's wife each March—is satisfactorily worked out by visiting Scotland Yard sleuth Joe Sandilands, whose future cases will be worth watching for.

*** Craig Holden: *The Jazz Bird,* Simon & Schuster, $25. In 1927 Cincinnati, Charles Taft, son of the ex-President-now-Chief-Justice, prosecutes bootlegger George Remus for the murder of his wife. It's based on a real case, but Holden admits to free invention, especially in the title character and victim, Imogene. Comparisons in early reviews to Doctorow and Fitzgerald raise unrealistic expectations, but the slow-starting narrative gathers weight and momentum as its tragedy-in-flashback plays out.

*** Michael Kilian: *The Uninvited Countess,* Berkley, $6.50.

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The second of the author's Jazz Age mysteries finds Greenwich Village art dealer Bedford Green among the Vanderbilts and their grand Newport, Rhode Island houses, investigating a mysterious Hungarian countess. Both the pace of the story and the command of 1925 details will keep you turning the pages.

*** Michael Pearce: *The Camel of Destruction,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Though set in 1910 Cairo, the plot involving inflexible bureaucrats, demon developers, and dubious accounting practices seems surprisingly timely. This is the second novel, first published in Britain in 1993, about the engaging semi-reluctant sleuth Captain Gareth Owen, who holds the mercurial position of Mamur Zapt in British-ruled Egypt. Pearce gets maximum humor from the clash of cultures. On the downside, the dialogue, including expressions like "OK" and "She kicked their ass," often seems to belong to a later period.

*** Carola Dunn: *The Case of the Murdered Muckraker,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. English journalist Daisy Dalrymple and her new husband, Alec Fletcher of Scotland Yard, visit the New York of 1923 and confront a murder in (I'm sure not coincidentally) the Flatiron Building, that historic skyscraper that is now the home of the book's publisher. The enjoyably humorous narrative ultimately disappoints as a whodunit, but the cross-country flying climax, which includes celebrity cameos I won't give away, redeems it somewhat. (The author is generally very good on the language differences of the two countries, but the term "dead cert" is British slang, not American.)

*** Stuart M. Kaminsky: *To Catch a Spy,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $24. Toby Peters, Hollywood private eye of the World War II era, has part-time spy Cary Grant as his latest celebrity client. As usual, the comic foibles of Toby and his friends and some well-chosen, often obscure period details are more important than the plot.

** Ron Goulart: *Groucho Marx, Secret Agent,* St. Martin's Minotaur/Dunne, $22.95. A reliably funny entry in another comic Hollywood series also has a spy theme, as Groucho encounters neo-Nazis around Halloween 1939. The appeal is more to fans of Charlie Chan and Thin Man movies than devotees of Ambler or Oppenheim, but the final gathering of the suspects lacks much punch.

** Roy Hoopes: *A Watergate Tape,* Forge, $24.95. In 1973's Watergate-obsessed Washington, journalist Raymond Hartley looks into the possibly related murder of an old friend. James M. Cain's biographer is a good reporter, mixing fact and invention skillfully, but both narrative and clunky dialogue often read like newspaper copy. (Psychic note: At one point, Hartley recalls in 1973 a remark

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made by Norman Mailer in 1976.)

** Sam McCarver: *The Case of the Uninvited Guest,* Signet, $6.50. In 1918 Paris, paranormal sleuth John Darnell investigates murder and ghostly sightings in the literary world. The two main guest celebrities, a somewhat bland Ernest Hemingway and teenage silent-screen star Mary Miles Minter, have an unlikely romance. This is a below-average entry in a resolutely old-fashioned series that can be a lot of fun—certainly I keep coming back to it—if you can meet the author halfway.

** Lise McClendon: *Sweet and Lowdown,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Set in 1940 Kansas City, the second case for private eye/parolee Dorie Lennox pays homage to Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep,* complete with invalid parent, out-of-control daughter, runaway spouse, and murdered chauffeur. With more attention to the main problem and fewer subplots, secondary characters, and serial-story tangents, this well-written novel might have maintained its early impetus. (Anachronisms: records of the time did not have multiple songs on them, and I seriously doubt Negro League ballplayers had their names on the backs of their uniforms.)

* Persia Walker: *Harlem Redux,* Simon & Schuster, $22. With clued detection, surprise murderer, extensive research, and a potentially terrific background of upper-crust African-American society in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance (1926), this first novel is clearly the most ambitious of those under review. Unfortunately, the handling of the material, including an absurd climactic trial, is clumsy and cliché-ridden.

Finally, a couple of genuine World War II period pieces from Rue Morgue Press. The second of Norbert Davis's three novels about Doan (private eye) and Carstairs (Great Dane), *Sally's in the Alley* ($14), first published in 1943, may not be quite as fine as its predecessor *The Mouse in the Mountain,* but the view of wartime Hollywood and the Mojave Desert is fascinating, and Chapter 6 is one of the funniest in detective fiction annals. You may not believe a word of Constance and Gwenyth Little's nuttily-plotted 1945 opus *The Black Eye* ($14), but it's fast and amusing in typical Little fashion.

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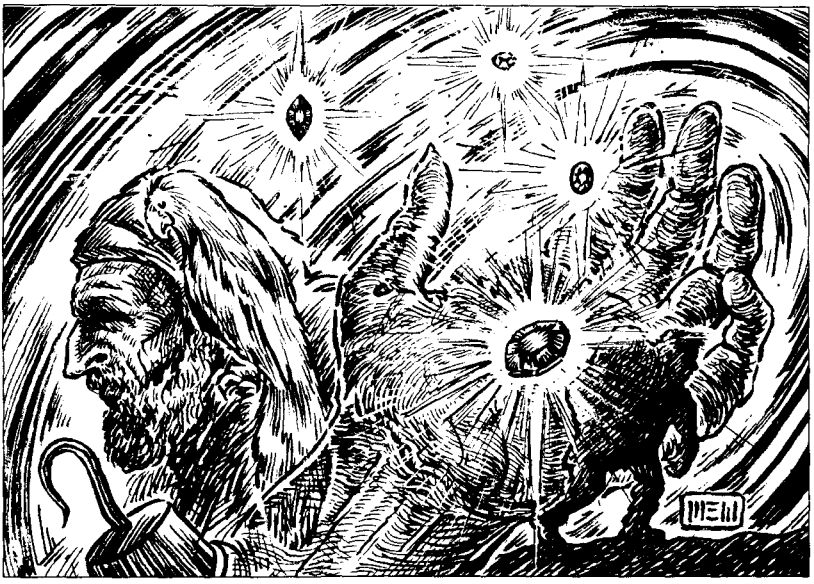

Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE JEWELS OF ATLANTIS

by James Powell

In later life Ambrose Ganelon IV dined once a month at Chez Catulle with Chief Inspector Roger Jolivet and a few of his Sureté people. There were several reasons why. For one thing, it was a free meal. And this was not unimportant. Four generations of Ganelons had taught criminals to steer clear of the Mediterranean principality. It had been years since Ganelon had a case. He survived on a small annuity left him by his grandmother, a successful jewel thief before she married his grandfather. Usually the money ran out well before the quarter did.

Then there were the Ganelon portraits in the restaurant's private dining room: the Founder, as his great-grandfather was called, scowling out through the varnish in fez and carpet slippers, leaning against an alabaster fireplace; Ganelon's grandfather, white lab coat over an elegant vest, examining a human skull with a hand lens; Ganelon's broad-shouldered father, cockeyed grin, pinstriped suit and all; and then the detective himself, wearing that very same suit, severely altered, of course.

No one had ever noticed the hand-me-down suit. This was all

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the more amazing because the painter had focused on it, thickening the material into boilerplate and broadening the stripe to awning proportions until the detective resembled a small nutmeat huddled inside a hefty nutshell.

These family portraits helped steel Ganelon's resolve to soldier on, for if he closed the detective agency crime would descend on the principality like a wolf on the fold and find a police force enfeebled by generations of inactivity.

Not that Jolivet's assistants weren't men of charm and conviviality with interesting hobbies to occupy their time. One, Ganelon could never keep straight which, had a reputation as a poet. Another was opera critic for *Vox Humana,* the radical music journal. While a third—was it Saint-Georges?—constructed crosswords.

There are always interesting factual elements in the Ganelon stories. In this case, the author explains, the technique mentioned for fingerprinting diamonds is real: "Apparently the discovery of diamonds in the Canadian north has gotten the RCMP involved in finding a way to distinguish Canadian stones from those tainted by civil warfare in Africa." Don't miss Crippen & Landru's new collection of Ganelon stories, *A Pocketful of Noses* (2002). ✝

Tonight Inspector Carlo Castinetti of the Italian Special Police joined them. Come to do a study of the Sureté's accounting system, the quick, dapper young man was delighted to meet a Ganelon. Castinetti impressed the others with his new cell phone, a Celesta, the latest in Italian design, its blue and white colors matching the inspector's two-tone shoes. The Celesta was passed around the table and loudly admired, for Jolivet's people had wanted cell phones for some time.

Near the end of the meal Saint-Georges told a story about the Gascon who bragged that his family heated their chateau in the winter by burning the marshal batons of their ancestors. While laughing with the others Ganelon gave the man a sharp look. Just to get by, the detective had started selling off the Founder's snuffboxes, gifts from the grateful crowned heads of Europe, and smelting down his grandfather's gold medals for scientific achievement. Had Saint-Georges found him out?

After dinner Ganelon refused a ride, choosing to walk home to 18 bis rue Blondin to calm his nerves. It wasn't just Saint-Georges' Gascon story. He was suffering from a kind of jitters his family called Fong Shoe. During their long struggle with the Eurasian evil genius Dr. Ludwig Fong and his descendants, the Ganelons

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had developed a premonition when a Fong was about to strike, a sensation like waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Fortunately, this generation of European Fongs had come up lame, while the American branch, as represented by the Fong twins, Calvin and Dwight, were too busy making money as Silicon Valley venture capitalists. And when last heard from, Bernardo O'Higgins Fong was fighting to control Latin America's narcotics trade. Besides, Fongs hated to fly. So the Big Drink was a strong antidote against them.

No, Ganelon blamed his Fong Shoe on a mere trick of memory. The day before, a French oceanographic exploring vessel, the *Papagena,* had docked in the Old Port on its way to chart the ocean bottom beyond Gibraltar. The name of the bird catcher's girlfriend in *The Magic Flute* brought the Fongs to mind for they had a weakness for Mozartian aliases.

Ganelon reached home. He made the long trudge up to his attic bedroom in the dark to save on the electric. But the Fong Shoe kept him from sleeping. Finally he turned the light on and picked up the bright-covered book on his bedside table.

The day Ganelon saw the *Papagena* he'd been working the tourists around the harbor in his disguise with a rented parrot riding on his filthy shoulder. (For a coin the bird chose your fortune from a sheaf of envelopes spindled on the pirate's hook.) Returning home, he had met Madame Blanche on the staircase. The ancient fortuneteller had rented a consulting room in the building since his father's days. According to him she had once been very beautiful. But now she was a gray apparition who always smelled of Camembert, for she had turned to tyromancy, a clairvoyant art based on watching cheese coagulate, and was a student of the writings of the Prophet of Perth, the Canadian curd cutter who had overseen the concocting of the Great Cheddar of Perth, Ontario, a veritable Mount Palomar of cheeses when it came to seeing into the future.

Ganelon was in a bad mood that day for he hadn't even made the parrot rental, and he warned her off with his best pirate growl and cut the air between them with his hook. But she pressed the book on him. "You must read this, Ambrose." It amazed him how she could pierce his every disguise.

Since he valued her advice, Ganelon took the book to bed with him that night. *Buzz Haycock and the Bung of Doom* was an illustrated boy's adventure story featuring Haycock, the Canadian aviation pioneer, first to fly over the Canadian Falls at Niagara in an airplane, first to go over the American Falls in an airplane. But after a few pages of the hearty hortatory turn-of-the-century style Ganelon set the book aside, dismissing it as just another instance of Madame Blanche's interest in things Canadian.

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Tonight his second try got him as far as the startling full-page drawing of the face of Finisterre, King of Atlantis, all puckered green skin, drooping catfish whiskers, and one eye shut by a terrible scar while its mate's merciless stare did the work of two.

The next morning Ganelon poked through his few coins and sat down at his makeup mirror, its frame thumbtacked with a thatch of moustaches, beards, and eyebrows. Today, he decided, he would be the reincarnation of Escritoire, the gypsy hunchback, who years ago made his living in front of the Bourse offering his lucky hump for stock speculators to write their trades on. Some said everything written there registered in his mind and was used by him to enrich himself. (Stories of beggars who are secret millionaires comfort the tenderhearted and justify the skinflint.)

Ganelon gave himself a swarthy complexion from a can, applied the appropriate mole to the correct side of his nose, selected the proper wig from his wig box, and rummaged with his foot on the prop-closet floor until he found the hump. When he strapped it on it seemed to lean as though whispering conspiracies in his ear.

Done up as Escritoire, Ganelon started down the stairs. Recently he had decided to put his finances in order by renting out the building, moving his office and living quarters up to the attic. So grandfather's laboratory became the offices of Ziggarut, a cheap line of Syrian cigarettes, and the Founder's first-floor study housed Jettatura, an Italian travel agency.

Then one night the alabaster fireplace in the Jettatura office had gone crashing down into the basement. Ongoing foundation repairs to 18 bis would eat up rent revenues for several years. Such occurrences were uninsurable under San Sebastiano law. Too many structures had been weakened in the seventeenth century when wealthy families constructed underground gondola entrances or stoops onto the main sewer artery. His father's sleek fifteen-foot Gar Wood runabout was moored there now. Ganelon used it to lead the annual parade of antique boats commemorating the Allied landing in 1945.

When Ganelon got to the Bourse he found it closed for the feast of St. Louis d'Or. As he turned homeward, a man in a cassock offered him money to witness a wedding. Ganelon recognized the sacristan of the nearby St. Felix Church and followed after him. Before they entered the side chapel of the church Ganelon noted a man in two-toned shoes watching over the top of a newspaper from a doorway across the street.

Inside the little chapel a middle-aged couple were standing at the altar rail in front of a small wooden box with a lid. Nearby was a man in white tie and tails, apparently the other witness prescribed by law.

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As the sacristan passed into the vestry, the woman turned and gave Ganelon a gentle smile. She had a plump, pleasant face whose dimples and deep-set eyes reminded Ganelon of an Irish Cobbler potato. Ganelon knew her from her pictures in the paper. Madame Camilla Valmont, a local philanthropist, had devoted herself to visiting the sick and imprisoned and caring for the needy until some unwise mining-stock investments by her late husband forced her to cut back drastically on her charitable work.

The man at Madame Valmont's side bowed slightly to Ganelon. He was so gaunt, his shoulder blades might have been wings if skeletons could fly. His off-the-rack suit showed too much wrist, giving length to his already slender fingers. Ganelon recognized Max Nordolf, a famous sleight-of-hand artist turned swindler who'd recently gotten out of prison.

The detective knew his fellow witness, too. Theo Gottlieb. (Small corners of the world like San Sebastiano leave much room for coincidence.) An editor-at-large for the magicians' journal *Trompe l'Oeil,* Gottlieb was a failed magician turned to writing about his craft. But he continued to wear the Mandrake moustache, top hat, and cape, and to carry an ivory-headed cane. He had come to San Sebastiano to do an article on Max Nordolf, for which he had already interviewed Ganelon.

Nordolf's career of fraud began twenty years before when, to draw attention to his local nightclub act, the sleight-of-hand artist went to the Petit Palais Museum one crowded Sunday afternoon, rolled up his sleeve, and extracted a flopping and wriggling fingerling from Raphael's famous painting "St. Francis Preaching to the Fishes." Newspaper articles about the incident failed to note the museum guards' discovery of a rubber pocket in Nordolf's jacket.

The publicity brought him bookings abroad and he kept his audiences interested by staging similar little miracles such as his liberation of several live pigeons from Tintoretto's "The Piazza San Marco" in the Paris Louvre.

Meanwhile, back in San Sebastiano for his wife's funeral, Nordolf returned to the Petit Palais Museum where witnesses say he leaped up onto a small marble-topped table beside Van de Hugen's portrait of Sixto I and appeared to extract the famous Blue Peter diamond from the prince's painted crown as one might pop a boil. Onlookers murmured in amazement when they saw the bare circle of canvas where the diamond had been. In a moment Nordolf made a pass with his hand and the Blue Peter reappeared on the crown.

Later, summoned to investigate, Ganelon discovered traces of gum arabic and concluded Nordolf had pasted a disk of bare canvas over the painted jewel and then removed it. But many preferred to believe that in some miraculous way the man had stolen

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the real Blue Peter, a storied diamond said to have the power to reproduce itself and cleanse flaws from other precious stones, leaving a paste imitation behind in its place. Nordolf supported himself on this belief for several years.

Then one day he was discovered in the Vatican Museum sitting with a beautiful naked baby in his lap beneath Lazaretto's immense "The Parliament of Cherubs." The child's golden curls and blue eyes made her a match for any of the beautiful children dancing in the painting behind her. Overnight wealthy Roman matrons were besieging Nordolf, prepared to pay any price for a cherub from a painting.

Later Nordolf was convicted of trafficking in human flesh. He asked to serve his jail time in San Sebastiano. Such requests from the principality's nationals were encouraged. After all, Europe's prisons were crowded, but Duranceville Prison stood near empty.

Ganelon heard scratching from inside Gottlieb's top hat on a nearby prie-dieu. When he turned, Gottlieb tried to distract him by pulling a raw egg from behind the detective's ear, but fumbled it.

When Ganelon glowered, Gottlieb glanced at his hump and said, "Don't get your back up, old man." Then he stepped between the mess he'd made on the chapel floor and the sacristan who had just appeared in priestly vestments.

To Ganelon it looked like Nordolf's old diamond-wedding scam. He resolved that he must do something. He couldn't stand by while a woman of Madame Valmont's character was swindled. As Ganelon watched, Nordolf put what had to be a copy of the Blue Peter into the box on the altar rail. Now Madame Valmont lay a rough-cut greenish diamond the size of a walnut next to it. The detective remembered hearing she had recently inherited a valuable diamond from her father's estate.

But what came next dumbfounded him.

"Dearly beloved," the fake priest began, "we gather here to join in holy matrimony these two diamonds, the Blue Peter diamond and the Sour Apple Green."

Was it just another coincidence that a diamond called the Sour Apple Green figured in what he'd read of *Buzz Haycock and the Bung of Doom*?

The ceremony continued until the final blessing. Then the sacristan closed the box and, carrying it, led the way to the vestry for the signing of the marriage license.

Madame Valmont and Nordolf signed first, then Gottlieb, who expressed the hope that the union would be blessed with issue. But as Gottlieb handed the pen to Ganelon and turned to go, the ferrule of his cane hit the floor in the wrong way and the whole thing burst out into a bouquet of artificial flowers. He left the

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vestry in some confusion.

When Ganelon added Escritoire's name to the certificate, the sacristan retired to his tiny office to make a copy. The detective watched as Nordolf presented Madame Valmont with the box and its key. "Keep it locked at all times," he warned. "Their honeymoon will be a nine-hour period of dematerialization. Open the lid before the time is up and both our diamonds will vanish into thin air."

"I understand," the woman replied.

"Until this evening at seven, then." With a warm smile Nordolf took his leave.

Ganelon decided to follow him and, somehow or another, recover the diamond, which he knew the man had palmed. But when the detective started after him Madame Valmont called him back to give him a banknote. "Thank you for being a part of this happy event," she said, moving toward the statue of the Virgin in the vestry corner to pray.

Ganelon hurried out onto the street just as Nordolf vanished around a far corner. As he headed after him a strap on the detective's leather hump gave way and he had to stop to push the sham disability back onto his shoulder. Two corners later he caught sight of Nordolf again just as a large drunk staggered out of a sidewalk cafe and collided with the swindler. With loud and accented apologies the drunk tried to drag him back into the cafe for a drink. Nordolf pushed him away and hurried off, sending the drunk staggering backwards into the next passerby whom he also tried to recruit as a drinking buddy. But the man continued on his way, turning down the next side street.

Ganelon was certain the drunk had picked Nordolf's pocket, then handed off the proceeds to his passerby accomplice. And if a man has his pocket picked right after palming a valuable diamond, it can only mean a falling-out among thieves. Since this was all about recovering Madame Valmont's diamond, Ganelon chose to follow the accomplice.

Eventually they reached a small square where a vintage white Voltiger limousine was parked, one with an open driver's seat and a closed passenger compartment with tinted windows. The drunk, now miraculously sober, had gotten there ahead of them and was standing on the limousine running board, talking animatedly down into the vehicle's sunroof. When the accomplice joined him, the conversation grew even more heated.

As Ganelon moved closer to hear them, Inspector Castinetti walked by. The Italian passed the limousine with careful nonchalance before ducking into a doorway. He reappeared a minute later at a second-story window and leaned out, trying to peer down into the sunroof. This alarmed the two men, who jumped into the dri-

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ver's seat. As the vehicle pulled away, Ganelon rushed out into the street to get the registration number and collided with Castinetti, who had dashed downstairs for the same purpose.

Helping Ganelon to his feet, the Italian went over and examined the spot where the limousine had been parked before continuing on his two-toned way.

Ganelon retraced his steps. As he passed the church again, Madame Valmont called to him from her chauffeur-driven car. "Thank you again for sharing in our happy event," she said, handing him another banknote out the window.

All Ganelon could do for now was return home. He arrived in disarray carrying the hump under one arm, a baguette of bread under the other, and a quarter-kilo of ham in his pocket. On the staircase he met Madame Blanche.

"Have you read the book yet, Ambrose?" she demanded.

"Still working on it, Madame," he lied.

"It's something you need to know," she insisted.

When he reached his room, Ganelon called the Sureté and was passed to Saint-Georges. He informed the inspector about the diamond-wedding swindle at St. Felix Church and alerted him that a team of foreign pickpockets using a white limousine was working the principality. Then he changed out of the remains of his Escritoire disguise, opened a bottle of wine, and ate lunch with the Buzz Haycock book propped open in front of him.

Thousands of years ago, he read, Atlantis had been the thriving port of an ingenious people who kept the ocean at bay by drilling a deep drainage hole at the bottom of which they inserted a massive plug—the Bung of Doom of the title—with a great chain attached. Whenever the sea threatened, the priests of Atlantis took four sacred jewels from the high altar and inserted them into the drum of the temple windlass to unlock it. They could now hoist the plug and send the encroaching water swirling down into the center of the earth until the danger to the city had passed. So Atlantis defied the sea.

But over the centuries Atlantis grew arrogant and fell into sinful ways such as mating with fishes. One night a corsair armada slipped inside the harbor and looted the city. The sacred jewels were scattered to the four corners of the earth. So when the sea rose again, Atlantis vanished beneath the waves.

In Haycock's adventure story the aviator battles for the jewels of Atlantis with Finisterre and his mer-minions who mean to enslave mankind by controlling the level of the Seven Seas. As he read, the detective was amazed to discover that both the Sour Apple Green and the Blue Peter were among the four Jewels of Atlantis.

Suddenly Inspector Castinetti appeared in Ganelon's doorway,

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red-faced and gasping for breath. In his father's day the man would have fallen into the room with a knife in his back. A generation earlier his respiratory trouble would have been symptomatic of the bite of the ticpolonga or Ceylonese spot-viper *(Daboia elegans)* for which Ganelon's grandfather possessed the only antidote. In the Founder's day the visitor would have come with breathless urgency to lay some locked-room riddle at the great detective's feet. But today the Italian was simply reacting to the four flights of stairs, the last a particularly steep and breakneck one.

Ganelon offered a chair. But his visitor preferred to stand while he recovered his breath. "Then welcome to my aerie." Ganelon gestured around his crowded quarters, ending with a pile of books heaped deliberately to resemble a computer and covered in black plastic. "The digital age has made a detective's needs much more compact," he explained.

When Castinetti could speak, he sat down and said, "Mr. Ganelon, I must confess I'm in San Sebastiano to investigate some peculiar circumstances leading up to Madame Camilla Valmont's inheritance of the diamond called the Sour Apple Green. I didn't come to you directly because I was afraid you'd laugh at my credulity. The business has a fabulous side to it."

"Please continue," said Ganelon.

"Her father, Mario Trenti, was murdered several months ago in a Milan bathtub," said Castinetti. "Grabbed by the ankles and pulled under water. The evidence suggested this had been done repeatedly, perhaps to extort information."

"Like the whereabouts of the diamond?" asked Ganelon.

Castinetti nodded. "The stone has a long history. Legend credits it with being the petrified bite Adam took from the apple in the Garden of Eden, bringing mankind to its present sour state. A poor Crusader knight of the Trenti family found it on the sword pummel of a fallen Saracen warrior before the walls of Acre. That same evening, St. Michael appeared in a dream to warn the knight to guard the diamond well, for in the wrong hands it could bring about the end of Christendom."

"Was that as specific as the angel got?"

Castinetti indicated it was and continued his story. "The knight returned to Italy, where on his deathbed he passed the responsibility of guarding the diamond to his eldest son. Ever since, the eldest Trenti male has remained on the family farm in the Italian Alps, keeping the ancestral pledge, always wearing the diamond in a leather pouch around his neck. Their neighbors regarded them as an aloof bunch, quick with that superior if-only-you-knew look. In recent years people spoke of a haunted well on the farm. Look down into it, they said, and the face looking back up at you was not always your own."

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Ganelon stopped the man with a raised finger. Smiling self-consciously, he asked, "A face like this?" He placed the edge of his hand across an eye. Then he made two fists and tugged on invisible whiskers.

The astonished Italian admitted it was. When Ganelon urged him to continue, Castinetti said, "The current count, a young bachelor, slept in the farm's old stone two-story springhouse during the hot summer months. On the morning of August seventeenth of last year the hired man arrived for work and discovered the upper windows of the springhouse, frames and all, lying shattered on the ground, with water running down the walls from the empty window spaces. Peering through a ground-floor window, he saw his dead master floating inside the flooded building. He summoned the police, who broke down the door, sending the body out into the courtyard in a gush of water. The leather pouch with the diamond inside they later found tied to a second-floor rafter.

"Apparently the mountain spring serving the springhouse had burst out during the night, flooding the building. Trenti tried to save himself by jumping up into the rafters where he drowned before the water pressure blew out the second-floor windows."

Here the telephone interrupted the story. It was Saint-Georges calling to inform Ganelon that the sacristan at St. Felix Church had just been found dead.

As they went downstairs to wait for the car Saint-Georges was sending around, Ganelon said, "I see what you mean by the story's fantastical element. Old stone buildings leak from every crack and crevice. To flood one would take an eruption of water strong enough to blow the roof off."

"But this springhouse was tight as a drum, walls freshly mortared, windows caulked," explained Castinetti. "Some gypsies passed through looking for just that kind of work and Trenti'd hired them on. And again, don't laugh, but the locals say the gypsy chieftain arrived in a leaky caravan that looked like an immense wine cask on wheels and directed the work from a motorcycle sidecar like a bathtub, water and all. No wonder his skin was puckered."

The detective cocked an eyebrow. "This morning, looking down into the limousine sunroof, was it him you expected to find?"

When they arrived at St. Felix Church, Saint-Georges and the pastor were waiting for them. The priest still wore the stole he'd used to administer the last rites. He repeated how he'd found the body. "I came to get ready for our special afternoon service for the Feast of St. Louis d'Or for the stock-market people. Poor Robert was just as you see him now."

The victim had been tied to a vestry chair and tortured with lit candle stubs before his throat was cut. "Maybe they were after the

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combination to the safe where we keep our sacred altar vessels," suggested the priest, shaking his head at the world we live in.

Ganelon and Castinetti exchanged glances.

"By the way," said Saint-Georges, "an officer patrolling on bicycle spotted your white limousine parked by a self-service car wash in the Quartier Russe. The attendant said two men washed it and left it, saying they'd come back later."

"They won't," Ganelon assured him.

"Well, listen to this," said Saint-Georges. "When the officer opened the back door he got a lap full of water."

Ganelon wasn't surprised. "Odds are they washed it with the sunroof open. To eliminate fingerprints."

The detective took Castinetti aside. "It seems the people I thought had the diamond are still looking for it," he said. "I have places to go. Perhaps you should fill Saint-Georges in on the Sour Apple Green and the Milan business."

The concierge of the tall old apartment building beneath whose mansard roof Madame Valmont lived recognized Ganelon and referred him across the street to the Parc des Tritons, "where Madame often goes to read in the afternoons."

Two gravel paths intersected at a splashing fountain crowded with sea demigods and goddesses, fishy creatures whose conch shells trumpeted water instead of music. On weekends, he knew, a carousel in the small fairground next-door to the park provided music enough and the tethered hot-air balloon ride gave shade of a sort.

Madame Valmont sat with a book on a bench facing the fountain. Ganelon introduced himself and got right down to business. "This diamond-wedding thing is a swindle, Madame. You'll never see the diamond or Max Nordolf again."

Madame Valmont studied him for a moment with her dark, deep-set eyes before she smiled. "But Max has to come back, Mr. Ganelon. He gets the pick of the litter."

Then she grew serious. "I met Max Nordolf through my work as a prison visitor. So I know what the police call him. Actually, Max started the swindler story himself. You see, he has this natural power over diamonds. He can charm them out of the ground. This I have seen him do on four occasions, one right here where we're sitting now and three other places of my own choosing. Each time he dug down and uncovered a diamond."

Madame Valmont began rummaging around inside her purse, adding absently, "He also claims he can remove flaws from precious stones and charm pearls out of the sea. But this I have not seen with my own eyes." She pulled out a twist of paper. "Here," she said. "He gave this to me as a memento of one of the events." Inside the paper was a small clear stone which might have been a diamond.

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"But think of the risk to Max if his powers became known," said Madame Valmont. "Criminals would make him their slave and lead him around after diamonds like a pig trained to root for truffles. Better for Max to pretend he's a swindler."

The audacity of the man's story almost took Ganelon's breath away. "He also claimed he could pull children out of paintings," he said.

The woman nodded heartily. "The child was his granddaughter, Angelina. He'd emptied half the orphanages of Europe before he was done. So you see, Max is no stranger to good works." She gave a gentle laugh. "He told his clients, 'No cherubs with wings. They're too hard to catch.'"

"He should have tried salting their tails, Madame."

She frowned at his tone. "Mr. Ganelon," she said, "charitable work has always been my great joy. I like helping others. But financial reverses obliged me to pull in my horns considerably. Inheriting the Sour Apple Green from my father didn't change that, since family tradition forbids its being sold. Luckily for me, Max has a wonderful diamond he's trained to increase and multiply. His diamond stud, he calls it. He suggested I might finance my charitable work by breeding my diamond at comfortable proper intervals. That is what we are trying . . ."

Madame Valmont stopped. She seemed to be staring at Ganelon's left shoulder, where Escritoire's hump had been. Had she recognized him? Then he realized she was looking beyond him to the fountain.

"A moment ago," she said in a puzzled voice, "I saw this hideous face staring out at us there among the gods and goddesses." She shook her head. "But now it's gone."

With a skeptical look at the fountain, Ganelon stood up. "Could you loan me this stone for an hour?" he asked.

"You wouldn't be your father's son if I couldn't," she replied. "Bring it back tonight. Come for the opening of the nuptial box at seven. Max Nordolf will be there. You'll see." She gave him her wonderful smile.

Instinctively Ganelon raised his hand for a tip. But he caught himself.

Jean-Luc Tabarin worked in a well-appointed office in the basement of his jewelry store, connected to every department by pneumatic tubes which delivered gems for his valuation and took them away again. In the area of precious stones Tabarin did not suffer fools lightly. A buzzer alerted the staff whenever he came onto the sales floor. They had instructions to do whatever it took to prevent him insulting the customers, including setting off the store fire alarm.

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The jeweler and the detective began with talk of Ganelon family cases involving precious stones: the Cerebus Emerald, the pearl called The Wanderer, and a celebrated diamond called the Baghdad Rose, which anyone who saw it must possess.

Then Ganelon produced Madame Valmont's small diamond. "I hear you've come up with a way to fingerprint diamonds."

Tabarin shrugged and moved the stone around on the desk with a fingertip. "Our customers have the right to know they aren't funding civil wars in Sierra Leone and Angola or wherever." He took the stone over to an electronic spectroscope which whirred to life. "Even diamonds of the first water have profiles, minute trace impurities pointing to place of origin."

Remembering that Valmont's mining stock had been Irish, Ganelon asked if the diamond could be from there. Tabarin chuckled. "The Shamrock-Blarneystone people claim kimberlite pipes in the Sligo area. Haven't seen a stone from there yet. Don't think I ever will."

He retrieved the spectroscope printout and read it. "This one's Brazilian. No doubt about it." Handing back the diamond, Tabarin asked brightly, "How about our Blue Peter being a fake?"

Ganelon blinked.

"You didn't hear? They didn't tell you?" The jeweler looked surprised. "Back when the euro was in trouble the EEC members were asked to put a value on their national regalia just in case. I did the evaluation here. Who else? Yes, our Blue Peter is paste."

Tabarin pulled out an ancient buckram ledger and began paging through it. "I recognize my great-grandfather's handiwork. He was quite an old bandit, Charlus Tabarin, selling real diamonds by day and sweating away at night on a process for making paste reproductions. Remember the fake Blue Peter he sold to your great-grandfather?"

Ganelon did. An informant alerted the Founder that Dr. Ludwig Fong intended to steal the Blue Peter during the coronation of Prince Faustus. Fong's reputation for evil was at its height. The mere mention of his name could have caused panic and flight among the thousands come to witness the ancient pomp and ceremony, visitors on whom the fragile economy of the principality depended. So the Founder had to move with care.

Fong arrived by train disguised as a Herr Wolfgang, a dealer in artificial gemstones. He introduced a narcotic into the frankincense smoking in the giant censer which swung from the ceiling during the service. With the cathedral in a drugged slumber and an accomplice working the air pump from out on the street, Fong entered the cathedral in a modified Augustus Siebe diving suit and pried the Blue Peter out of the crown.

Fong intended to escape from San Sebastiano as he had come.

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He checked his sample case at the railway station without recognizing the Founder in his baggage-clerk disguise. The Founder replaced the Blue Peter with Charlus Tabarin's copy and returned the real diamond to the San Sebastiano regalia.

"Here's the thing," said Tabarin, tapping a page in the ledger. "Old Charlus made two copies of the Blue Peter. And he marked his paste work. The copy in the crown was one he made for"—Tabarin leaned forward to read the name—"a Herr Wolfgang."

"You mean the Founder stole a fake?"

"It sure looks like it," smiled the jeweler. "The store ended up buying back your great-grandfather's fake. It was as part of the price this same Herr Wolfgang paid for two diamonds he'd had old Charlus hunting long and hard for, the Rodriquez Solitaire and the Stone of Asconia.

"We kept the fake Blue Peter in our inventory for years, renting it out mostly at carnival as part of a costume until we sold it as a theatrical prop to, guess who."

"Max Nordolf," answered Ganelon. But his mind was on the Rodriquez Solitaire and the Stone of Asconia. They were the last two Jewels of Atlantis.

Ganelon left Tabarin's in something of a daze. The Fongs had three of the four Jewels of Atlantis. If they got the Sour Apple Green they'd have mastery of the world through their control of the Bung of Doom. The Bung of Doom? But that was an absurdity out of a book for boys.

Ganelon walked and thought. The death of Count Trenti might have been an accident of nature. But he could certainly see the hand of the Fongs in the murder of Madame Valmont's father in Milan and the sacristan at the St. Felix Church.

At last he reached the Old Port, where he was surprised to find the *Papagena,* the oceanographic explorer, had left its moorings and now lay at anchor beyond the harbor entrance. This discovery sent him to the nearby Ministry of the Marine to visit his friend Lucien Chapeau, hereditary admiral of the principality. He arrived at cocktail hour when Chapeau and the young salts of his staff drank rum and swapped sea stories. Ganelon's business was brief, and he refused to stay for a drink. An ardent skier, Chapeau served his rum hot and buttered.

Later, passing the famous Blue Gate in the royal palace's west wall, Ganelon thought he smelled Princess Dixie's wonderful Southern pot roast and regretted he'd worn out his welcome there by resisting her attempts to marry him off.

The gate reminded him of the fireplace disaster. Years before, as a token of Tancredi-Ganelon intimacy, Prince Raoul had given the Founder a Louis Picard painting of the Blue Gate. (The artist did

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empty street scenes, people said, because he couldn't get human legs right.) The painting had been hanging over the mantel when the fireplace came crashing down into the basement. The workmen had set it carefully aside while they rebuilt the floor and fireplace foundations. Then they discovered it was impossible to get the painting out again. So there it remained like the proverbial boat in the basement.

Suddenly Ganelon realized how late it had become. He was too far from home to get his blind musical-saw player disguise and come back before the Abbey of the Holy Vernicle soup kitchen closed. He often took his evening meal there when money was low. But a disguise was de rigueur. The monks' soup was extraordinary, well worth going unshaven and shabby to get a bowl. So Father Abbot ordered Brother Gregory, who once boxed professionally, to keep an eye peeled for gourmet interlopers.

Just before seven, Ganelon took the elevator up to Madame Valmont's apartment. She led him into the spacious living room whose windows overlooked the park. He was surprised to find Castinetti and Theo Gottlieb there.

"When Saint-Georges told me about the diamond wedding, I called and invited myself for the opening," explained the Italian. "I've never actually seen the Sour Apple Green."

Gottlieb must have been entertaining them. He was down on his knees cleaning egg off the rug. He smiled up at Ganelon. "This will be the perfect cap to my Nordolf article."

"It's almost time to begin," said Madame Valmont and, excusing herself, she left the room. A moment later the doorbell rang. When Ganelon answered it, he found Max Nordolf standing on the threshold, looking solemn. His mood deepened when he saw the detective.

"We've been looking for you, Mr. Nordolf."

Nordolf shrugged his narrow shoulders and came into the apartment. "I've been walking. I've been thinking."

Madame Valmont returned to the living room carrying the nuptial box just as the clock struck seven. Smiling at Nordolf, she said, "I'm very excited, Max." Nordolf opened his mouth to speak but her eagerness made him shut it again. Madame Valmont produced the key and opened the box. Inside lay the fake Blue Peter and the Sour Apple Green with three small diamonds nestled against it as though nursing.

Castinetti and Gottlieb made noises of amazement. Madame Valmont started to clap with delight. But Nordolf seized her hands in his.

"My dear," he insisted, "this swindle has gone far enough. It's time you knew I'm as fake as my diamond is." When she cocked her puzzled head he added, "Please try to understand. I was broke

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and getting out of prison. One visiting day a Mr. Fong offered me a great deal of money to do my diamond-wedding scam. I was to palm the Sour Apple Green and give it to him.

"That was the plan. But last night I knew I couldn't go through with it. Stealing the diamond would mean I'd never see you again." He nodded at the box. "As for this little domestic scene, my dear, those small diamonds there are three of the four Fong gave me to win your confidence, the ones I dug up out of the ground for you. You see, I wanted you to believe in me. But now all I want is that you know the truth."

Nordolf turned to the others. "She is an extraordinary woman, gentlemen. I hope she'll let me use my powers of persuasion to raise money for her charitable work."

"And after church," asked Ganelon, "on your way to tell Fong the deal was off, your pocket was picked?"

"That's right," agreed Nordolf. "It was the double-cross. Fong never meant to pay me."

Outside the twilight deepened abruptly. As Ganelon turned, a gray mass filled the windows. With a sudden shattering of wood and glass, four armed men burst into the living room from the ledge outside. Behind them hung the basket of a hot-air balloon.

One man strode forward, the leader of the intruders if length of sideburns was any indication.

Nordolf moved between him and Madame Valmont. "It's over, Fong," he said.

"Bernardo O'Higgins Fong decides such things," said the man, flinging Nordolf into the arms of one of his men. With a mock bow to Madame Valmont, Fong scooped up the Sour Apple Green in his gloved fist.

"Fong," shouted Ganelon.

The intruder turned. When he saw Ganelon he smiled, raised his weapon, and pointed it between the detective's eyes. "We have old family business to settle, you and I."

Suddenly Theo Gottlieb leaped between them, knocking Fong's weapon aside with his cane, which burst out into a paper bouquet. The two men wrestled together until Fong broke away and struck Gottlieb to the floor with his handgun.

"Vamanos, muchachos!" Fong shouted. At his order the armed men backed toward the shattered windows and clambered outside. Fong covered them, standing with a leg in the room and the other on the ledge, while they got into the balloon, ignited a fuel canister in the basket, and cut the tethering. At the last minute Fong joined them.

Ordering Castinetti to keep everyone back from the windows while the balloon was in gunshot range, Ganelon knelt down and gently helped the dazed Gottlieb to his feet.

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"You may all want to watch this," he said and led everyone to the windows. The balloon was drifting slowly away across the rooftops. Ganelon pointed out the crossbow bolt buried in the mansard shingle. It had carried the wire the intruders used to pull the tethered balloon hand over hand across to the apartment building.

Now Fong and his men were floating above the Old Port and out toward the light-festooned rigging of the *Papagena.*

"They're getting away!" insisted Castinetti. Ganelon said nothing. In the next moment, the dark silhouette of the corvette *Porpentine,* the only ship in San Sebastiano's navy, slid out from behind Fort Ste. Odile at the harbor entrance. Its antiaircraft gun spoke for him. The balloon staggered, collapsed, and fell into the sea like a giant sock.

Ganelon was the first to leave the apartment. Although he had left Admiral Chapeau the Valmont telephone number, he decided to hurry down to the harbor himself to meet the admiral's personal launch returning from the *Porpentine.* Chapeau assured him no one had survived the balloon crash. Not a one.

It had been a long day. Ganelon returned to 18 bis rue Blondin and headed upstairs in the familiar darkness. When he was at eye level with the last landing, something bigger than a rat and equipped with an electronic antenna bolted across the moonlight and into a dark corner, leaving behind a small pile of pellets of some kind. Curious, he picked up a few and continued up to his room. He turned on the light and looked down at his discovery. Rabbit droppings.

"Yes, Ambrose is a dirty little beast, isn't he?" said an amused voice.

Fongs always named their pets Ambrose. Ganelon looked up. Theo Gottlieb stood smiling beside his desk. The detective shook his head wearily. He had known Fongs didn't like to fly. And the Mozartian alias shouldn't have escaped him. Theo for Theophilus, beloved of God. And Gottlieb, ditto. Theo Gottlieb. Amadeus Amadeus.

Fong gestured politely with his cane toward the small bathroom where Ganelon could wash up. Stepping back to let Ganelon pass, he bumped his head on the sloping ceiling.

Ganelon flushed the pellets down the toilet and washed his hands. So Fong's coming to his defense had been a ploy so his sideburned minion could slip him the Sour Apple Green. Ganelon returned to the room still drying his hands on a towel and wondering, if Fong had the diamond, why was he here?

Fong blocked his way. He touched a pocket in his white waistcoat. "Ambrose," he said, "I have the Blue Peter." He touched his left sleeve. "I have the Rodriquez Solitaire." He touched the lapel of his jacket. "I have the Stone of Asconia." Now he reached behind

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Ganelon's ear as if to find another egg but pulled it back empty. "I don't have the Sour Apple Green."

Fong drew a sword blade from his cane. "When, as I anticipated, my merry band plunged to their death, I had the diamond in my pocket. But when I left Madame Valmont's it was gone. You stole it when you helped me to my feet. Give it back or I'll take it from your dead body."

Fong tried to underscore his words with a flourish of the sword. But the close quarters made him clumsy, and the point of the blade caught a corner of Ganelon's computer cover, pulling it aside. Puzzled, Fong looked down at the pile of books. Then he shook his head as if throwing off an impossible idea. He raised the sword and took a step toward Ganelon, only to stop and look around the attic room.

Suddenly he laughed with joyful discovery. "You are poor, Ganelon," he said. "This shabby cubbyhole is your home. Those broken-down shoes are your Sunday best. I've seen scarecrows better dressed. Count on me. By tomorrow the brotherhood of crime will know you're nothing but a man of straw." Fong lowered his blade. "I think I'll let you live so they can see for themselves.

"No, of course you don't have the Sour Apple Green. But now I know who does. Before daybreak, it will be mine. And he who rules the tides rules the world."

Having found his exit line, Fong turned his back and started to walk away, perhaps imagining the effect the cape would make. Desperate, Ganelon tried to grapple with him from behind. But Fong had youth and strength. He shrugged the detective off contemptuously, sending him tottering backwards. Ganelon fell, striking his head on the corner of the desk.

He came to with the sound of Fong's footsteps still pounding down the stairs. He dashed unsteadily after him. When Ganelon reached the ground floor he burst out onto the empty street. How could he have lost the man so quickly? Ganelon stood there wondering which way to go. Suddenly, from the sewer grating in the cobbles beneath his feet, he heard a familiar rumble, the revving up of his father's Gar Wood runabout.

Ganelon dashed back into 18 bis and over to the door to the basement. The light was on. He charged down the steps. Picard's famous Blue Gate painting leaned against the far wall blocking the entrance to the gondola stoop. By some trick of the eye, the gate seemed to beckon. When Ganelon reached it, he discovered the slash Fong had cut in the canvas where the gate was. Stepping through the slit, Ganelon sprinted toward the sewer and the throbbing engine. But he was too late. There was Fong at the wheel of the sleek runabout disappearing around a bend in the sewer, the magician's cape fluttering behind him.

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Suddenly Ganelon remembered something. Just as he was leaving Madame Valmont's after the balloon crash, Nordolf had embraced Fong, congratulating him for coming to Ganelon's aid. Nordolf had picked Fong's pocket. And Fong knew it.

Ganelon rushed back upstairs and telephoned Madame Valmont. When she told him that Nordolf had, indeed, recovered the diamond and was still there with her, he instructed her to lock the door and not let anyone in until he arrived.

Ganelon found his father's Hroscoe forty-five in its shoulder holster. He put the holster on and paused for a quick glance in the mirror. Yes, the weight of the weapon did, in fact, give him the shadow of his father's cock-eyed grin. Then he took a deep breath and dashed back down the stairs.

Madame Valmont and Nordolf listened while Ganelon explained the importance of the last of the Jewels of Atlantis and why Fong would have to come for it tonight, before Madame Valmont could put it in her safety-deposit box. For now he advised her to lock herself in her bedroom while he and Nordolf stood guard in the living room.

The long day turned into a long night. The concierge had provided plastic sheeting to close the shattered windows. Every time the wind made the plastic flap or the elevator whirred or a cloud passed across the moon Ganelon tensed and moved toward his Hroscoe.

At first, to pass the time, Nordolf talked of his new partnership with Madame Valmont and the differences of the swindler's trade and fundraising for charitable works. He seemed to think the latter would be most challenging. But as the hours passed and Fong didn't come, the man dozed.

Ganelon remained alert. Fong would be there. By tomorrow the diamond would be beyond his reach. And when he came, Ganelon would have to kill him. If he didn't, every criminal worth his salt would come to town looking to try him out. And San Sebastiano would never be the same after that. Yes, Ganelon would kill him. And he'd never killed anyone before. Not even a Fong.

But sunrise came without Fong. As Ganelon tried to focus his tired mind on the flaw in his logic, Admiral Chapeau called to inform him that his father's capsized runabout had been found floating in the harbor. There was more. When the boat was taken out of the water they found a man's body, the red silk cord of his cape entangled in the runabout's propeller.

What had capsized the runabout, Chapeau could not say, for the harbor had been calm all night. "But the sea plays strange tricks," the old salt insisted, adding, by way of illustration, how some quirk of the harbor current had turned every one of the dead man's many magician's pockets inside out.

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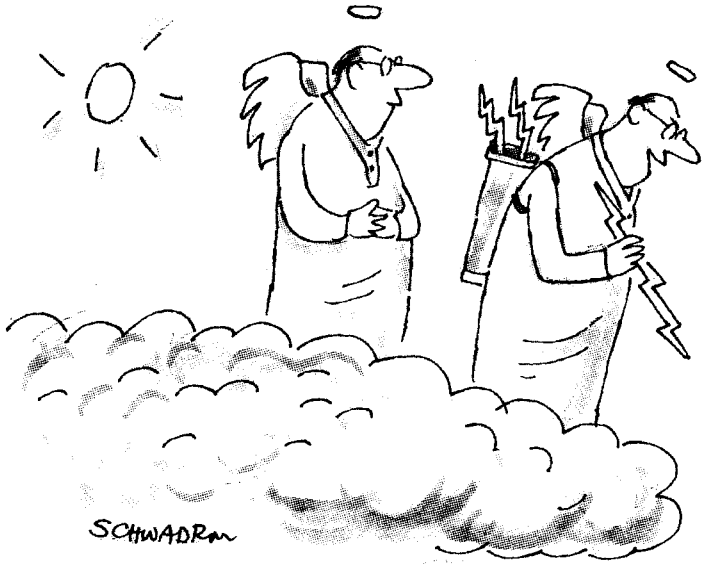
Ganelon left the apartment later that morning with the Sour Apple Green in his pocket. Insisting the diamond was too important for anyone but him to keep, Madame Valmont had made him a gift of it. So there he was. He couldn't sell it. And he had to make sure the Fongs didn't get it. And now he had a white rabbit to look after. He would call it Bernardo. Ganelon shook his head over the Alice-in-Wonderland madness of it all.

When he reached the corner of the rue du Trac and the Boulevard Tancredi he remembered last year's carnival. The theme had been "Family Portraits." The very air smelled of mothballs. Everyone wore clothes from the attic. Some even carried gilded papier-mâché picture frames.

Turning this very corner one carnival morning he had come face-to-face with four Americans in straw hats dressed up like the Ganelon portraits at Chez Catulle. They were a barbershop quartet, the Hawkshaw Four. Though startled, Ganelon found himself strangely moved by their rendition of "Shine On Harvest Moon." And the baritone dressed up like his father had winked at him.

Ganelon hadn't thought the wink congratulatory at the time. But remembering it now, he did. ●



"What do you mean I can't hit the same spot more than once? I just got my ex-wife twice!"

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Art by Darryl Elliott

KILL THE UMPIRE

by Jon L. Breen

"Mr. Broderick," I say to the man behind the desk, "it's just an expression. It doesn't mean anything."

With a smirk of pity for a well-meaning but naive citizen, Broderick says, "Mr. Gorgon, our policy at Eisenhower High School is zero tolerance. Zero tolerance on tobacco, zero tolerance on alcohol, zero tolerance on drugs, zero tolerance on weapons, zero tolerance on racist and sexist thought and expression, and zero tolerance on provocative language that might incite violence, whether directed toward another student or toward an authority figure."

How, I wonder, do they go about policing racist and sexist thought? No, I won't ask; I'll stick to the issue at hand. The principal is obviously going to be a hard nut to crack. If I can get him past parroting the school's code of conduct, maybe we can start to communicate.

The pear-shaped Rodney Broderick must be a good bit younger than I am—if he were my age, he'd be a fellow AARP member by now—but he looks years older. The smiling face in the various pho-

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tos on the walls of his office, showing him shaking hands with local politicians and congratulating successful Eisenhower High Penguins sports teams, seems to belong to a younger, happier man. The creased face he shows me now doesn't seem to go with the rotund body. Rodney Broderick reflects the strains of the thankless life of a school administrator. I resolve to be tactful.

"Sutton McArdle is a great kid, Mr. Broderick." Over half a century out of high school, I still can't imagine addressing a principal in his office as anything but "mister." "I've known her since the day I moved down the block from her family ten years ago. She brought me a plate of her mom's cookies to welcome me to the neighborhood, and we've been pals ever since."

Broderick raises an eyebrow. "Pals? Mr. Gorgon, if you'll pardon my saying so, an adult male having too close a relationship with a teenage girl is asking for trouble."

I draw a deep breath and bite off an angry reply that wouldn't help Sutton. This guy means well, I tell myself, but he's been too long in the trenches. He needs to get out more.

"Maybe you don't know about Sutton's situation," I say. "Her mother's done a great job raising her alone. Her father died when she was six years old. I haven't taken the place of a father or even a grandfather, but I've tried to be a good influence on her."

"I'm sure that's admirable," Broderick says, nervously fingering a penguin paperweight. "But what does it have to do with the disciplinary action I was obligated by school policy to take?"

"Look, I'll admit I wasn't there at the ball field when this incident happened, so maybe I'm missing something. But according to Sutton, she was just sitting in the bleachers watching her boyfriend pitch against Roosevelt. It was a close game, and the crowd was getting into it. Baseball encourages noise, you know. It's not like tennis or golf."

"We don't object to noise per se. In its proper place."

"I'm glad to hear it," I say, trying very hard not to sound sarcastic. "The umpire made some ball and strike calls Sutton disagreed with. Fans have a right to make their feelings known on those

It's a rare treat when *EQMM*'s mystery book reviewer of more than twenty years, Jon L. Breen, spins a mystery yarn of his own. Mr. Breen has produced, this time, a case for his series character Ed Gorgon, a retired baseball umpire. "Kill the Umpire" will also appear in 2002 as the title story of a collection of short Breen mysteries from Crippen & Landru. The reviewer/author is a retired librarian. ¶

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occasions. Sutton got a little riled up and yelled, 'Kill the umpire!' Now I umpired in the Major Leagues for over thirty years, and I can tell you that kind of thing is just part of the game. Nobody's threatening anybody. Nobody's going to kill anybody. Nobody's inciting anybody to riot. And by the way, *did* anybody riot? Did anybody kill the umpire?"

"Not the point. Several members of the faculty, as well as other spectators, heard what the young woman yelled. Threatening language toward anyone is contrary to school policy. When what she said was reported to me, I had no choice but to activate our zero-tolerance policy and suspend her for five days."

"The suspension means she'll miss—"

"The spring dance, summer play auditions, the State University recruiting day. I'm well aware of what she will miss, but she should have thought of that before she said what she did. That Sutton McArdle is a good student with a record of good citizenship is beside the point. Zero tolerance means just that, zero tolerance. I can't show favoritism."

"But what she said was so harmless."

"In your day, even in my day, maybe. But times have changed. Have you been reading the newspapers or watching television, Mr. Gorgon?"

"Yes and no."

"Haven't you heard of teenagers bringing deadly weapons to school? Haven't you heard of Columbine? Don't you know how grievous a problem guns on campus have become?"

"Did Sutton McArdle bring a gun to campus?" I ask innocently.

"Of course not."

"Does Eisenhower High have a problem with guns on campus?"

"Not up to now, I'm happy to say. But no one knows where this epidemic of senseless violence may strike next. Would you want me to take unnecessary chances?"

I'm almost stumped. How can I reason with this guy? "You know, Mr. Broderick, I'm afraid you're just asking for bad publicity here. You and your school could be made to look ridiculous if—"

"Has someone been talking to the media, Mr. Gorgon? Have *you* been talking to the media?"

"No, and I won't. And I'm pretty sure Sutton and her mother haven't been on the phone to Channel Five either. But how many people have heard about this suspension? All it takes is one whistle-blower to have the papers and TV stations on your case."

"Threats won't help, Mr. Gorgon."

"I'm not threatening you," I say, maintaining my cool with an effort. I decide not to mention the other possibility: getting the lawyers involved. It would just agitate him more, and I don't think Sutton's mother is the litigious sort anyway. After a deep breath, I

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say quietly and reasonably, "I understand the umpire in question is on the faculty here, is that right?"

"That's right. Jeffrey Winters. Mr. Winters teaches history and oversees the computer lab."

"That's allowed, is it? For a teacher to umpire one of his own school's games?"

"It was an emergency. The regular umpire called in sick. Having a teacher step in as umpire is allowed by our league rules, provided, of course, that both sides agree. Which both sides did."

"Is he an experienced umpire?"

"Yes, and a former baseball coach here at Eisenhower. The coach of Roosevelt was well satisfied with his competence and objectivity."

"How did the current coach at Eisenhower feel about it?"

"Mr. Gorgon, if you'll forgive me, I think we've wandered from the topic you wished to discuss."

"Not necessarily. Was Sutton McArdle the only person who questioned Winters's umpiring?"

"Again, beside the point."

"I don't think so. Was Winters offended by Sutton yelling 'Kill the umpire'? Did he feel his life was somehow in danger because of it?"

"Is that relevant?"

"It seems very relevant to me. If Winters didn't take it seriously, why should anybody else?"

"Because we have a zero-tolerance policy—"

"Yeah, I know," I say, straining to stay civil. "Look, do you think I could talk to this Winters? As umpire to umpire?"

"It wouldn't help."

"I understand you can't change your mind. Policy is policy and all that. But it might set *my* mind at rest, and get me out of your hair, if I could have a word with Winters. Think I can?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Broderick looks at his watch. "It's nearly four-thirty. Almost everyone has gone home by now, but Mr. Winters might be in the computer lab. He often stays late." Broderick hits an extension number on his phone, listens a moment, and puts the receiver down muttering, "Damn voice mail. He's probably there, though. He's off duty, and there's no reason he needs to answer his phone." It still rankles, though, the principal's manner makes clear.

"If you'll just give me directions to the computer lab—"

"No, no. Guests on campus are my responsibility. I'll go with you."

I follow Broderick through the door of his office, down an empty hallway of student lockers, out of the administration building, and across the virtually deserted quad to one of those temporary class-

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room bungalows that's probably been there twenty years. Through the windows, I can see rows of computers on tables.

"Impressive," I say.

"We've been fortunate," he replies. He knocks on the door of the bungalow—a surprising gesture, it seems to me, by one to whom no school doors should be closed—and when there is no answer, pulls out a ring of keys. Before using one, though, he tries the door of the bungalow, which opens. "Mr. Winters?" he calls.

There's no answer. "Where is he?" Broderick mutters under his breath. I imagine he's distressed the door has been left unlocked and the expensive hardware unattended. He walks into the room, and I follow him. The teacher's desk is at the opposite side of the room, facing the rows of computers. Broderick heads that way, and I keep following.

Mr. Winters, it develops, hasn't deserted his post. He's lying behind the desk, faceup, eyes wide open, an ugly wound on his forehead, fairly fresh blood fanned beneath his head on the floor. A heavy computer tower lies next to him on its side, and I'm willing to bet one of its sharp edges will match the dent in the unfortunate teacher's skull. We don't jump to conclusions about these things anymore, but it's pretty clear to me the amateur umpire is dead.

Broderick looks stunned for a second, then jumps into action. He picks up the telephone on the teacher's desk and punches an extension number. "Gladys, it's Rodney. Is Andy still there? . . . Send him to the computer lab right away. It's an emergency." He lays down the receiver. "School nurse. Doctor sees kids one afternoon a week. I'll get security now." He dials another extension, then mutters, "Damn recording," and slams down the receiver.

Now Broderick just stands with his mouth open, as if his emergency procedures have been exhausted.

"Call the police," I suggest. "Nine-one-one."

"Of course. Yes, of course."

A minute later, two men come trotting up the steps outside and burst into the bungalow. One is a stocky, muscular Hispanic in a sweat suit, the other a tall and good-looking young Anglo in a lab coat.

"It's Jeff," says Broderick. "He's, uh, had an accident. Behind the desk."

Both men start toward the body's location. Knowing the teacher's death is certainly no accident, I raise my hands and block their way.

"You the doctor?" I say to the lab coat.

"Yes. Andrew Spector."

"I think maybe you should check the body and the rest of us stay here, Dr. Spector. The police are going to want the crime scene pro-

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tected as much as possible."

The doctor walks to the desk and kneels by the body. The shorter man says, "Crime scene?" Then he peers at my face with a look of recognition and says, "Ed Gorgon?"

I nod. "Bill Mendoza," he says, and offers his hand. "I've seen you on TV a million times. I coach baseball here."

A moment later, Dr. Spector rises from a kneeling position by the body and confirms that Winters is dead.

"I suggest we all wait outside until the police arrive," I say.

Mendoza says, "Shouldn't we—isn't there something we should do?"

"Nothing we can do," I say.

"You're right," says the doctor. "Jeff's been murdered. It's a police matter now."

We all go outside to wait. Broderick looks like he's in shock, and I wonder if he needs some help from the doctor.

"I was over at the health office when your call came," Mendoza says, answering an obvious question no one has asked. "I came in case I could help. What—what happened to him? Who did it?"

"We don't know," I say. "Either of you see Winters earlier today?" Broderick throws me a look questioning my right to ask questions but remains speechless.

"No," says Mendoza. "I wouldn't, though. I was over at the gym all day till I went over to the health office. Didn't even pass by here. You see him, Andy?"

Dr. Spector shakes his head. "I just got in an hour or so ago, and I've been seeing patients since then. Gladys can tell you."

These guys seem eager to establish alibis. "Any other visitors on campus, Mr. Broderick?"

"Visitors have to check in at the office," Broderick says in a dazed monotone. "That's our policy."

"But anybody could have wandered onto campus," says Mendoza.

Spector nods. "It's not that hard."

"Did anybody check in at the office?" I ask.

"You did," says Broderick.

"Right," I say patiently. "Was there anybody else?"

"No."

"Did any of you three see any strangers on the campus today?"

Spector rubs his jaw. "I don't know all the kids. I don't even know all the faculty. I'm not here that much."

"I'm mostly down at the gym," says Mendoza, "but I'm always seeing strangers."

"Are you implying I don't have control of my campus?" Broderick explodes. He's losing it. I expect him to break out the Captain Queeg balls at any moment.

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"No, sir," says Mendoza. "Certainly not." He exchanges a glance with Spector. Before I can probe what's going on, a police car, complete with siren, pulls up, and we suddenly have a crowd on what seemed a deserted campus moments before.

"I have an alibi, Ed," says Sutton McArdle, a dead-serious expression on her pretty young face.

It's not funny, but I almost laugh at her earnestness. She's sitting in my cluttered living room, looking very young and innocent despite fashionably pierced ears, nose, and bellybutton. At least she's been smart enough not to get tattooed—piercings, I'm told, will close up when no longer wanted, but tattoos stay forever, barring a painful and expensive removal process. As I've learned through knowing Sutton and some of her friends, though, even the pictorially decorated youngsters who look most weird and alien to people my age are just kids, same as always, no better and no worse than any other generation.

We agreed earlier that Sutton would come over tonight to see how my meeting with the principal went. Knowing she must already have been the object of some police questioning, I am still not surprised she's keeping the appointment. Her boyfriend, Ty Kelleher, a fairly conservative kid with only one pierced ear, has come along, too. He's well built, but his thick glasses make him look as much like a computer nerd as a jock.

"You don't need an alibi, Sutton," I say.

"I, like, keep telling her that, Mr. Gorgon," says Ty. "I mean, like, I'm all, 'Chill out, Sutt,' and she's all, like, drama queen, y'know?"

"Ty," she says severely but lovingly, "do try to speak proper English. I know you can. I've heard you." She turns back to me, dramatizing away. "You don't think someone would actually kill Mr. Winters just because I yelled 'Kill the umpire,' do you? I couldn't have put the idea in somebody's head, could I?"

"That's silly, and you know it," I say, and Ty nods.

"Who *do* you think did it, Ed?" she asks. "You're a detective. Sort of."

"Only very sort of, and your school's not my turf. I don't know the people. Of course, I met your principal—"

"Mr. Nimrod Broadbutt," Ty mutters.

"Ty!" Sutton's admonition has equal parts shock and amusement.

"I also met the school doctor. What do they call him?"

"Don't say it, Ty!" Sutton says.

"It might be important," I say, meaning it playfully but getting a serious reaction from the two teenagers.

"Is he a suspect?" Sutton demands, wide-eyed. "I mean, they do

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call him Handy Andy Speculum, but I never really heard he does anything, uh, unprofessional."

Ty says to me, with a man-to-man leer, "Handy Andy Speculum is, like, the PG-13 version, y'know?"

"That's enough of that, Ty. You're descending into the gutter. Anyway, I hear Dr. Spector has helped a lot of people with, uh, things."

"Things?" I say. "What kind of things do you mean?"

"Things they didn't want to go to their parents about. I've never gone to him myself, because we have our own family doctor, and I don't—well, never mind about me, because I have an alibi. Ty, tell Ed what you heard, what you told the police."

Ty shrugs and says with preposterous casualness, "Well, like, y'know, I might have heard Mr. Winters's last words. I might have heard him talking to the murderer."

That gets my attention. "What did he say?"

"Do you have a computer, Mr. Gorgon?"

"Oh yeah, certainly. I may look like an old fart, but I do e-mail and surf the 'Net and the whole nine yards."

"What kind you got?"

"Tyrus," says Sutton, with a chilly tone to go with her use of her boyfriend's whole first name, "I didn't come here to listen to a lecture on computers. Mr. Gorgon's time is valuable. Please get to the point."

"I am, I am. But there've been, like, all different stages of development of computers. You know, mainly they get faster and faster, powerfuller and powerfuller, and soon as you get something new, next day it's like obsolete, y'know? In the olden days, they had 286's, which seemed great to people back then, and then they got 386's, which were better and faster, and then they got 486's, and now they got Pentium processors. My dad just got me a Pentium 4. But it, like, runs a more advanced version of Windows than the ones at school, so if I, like, work on something at home and bring the disk to school to work on, y'know, I have to be sure it's something the computers at school can read or it all comes out like garbage."

"Ty," says Sutton, not quite as frostily, "this is more detail than we need."

"I, like, just want to be sure Mr. Gorgon understands."

"He's real quick at picking things up, believe me."

"Okay, okay. Anyway, I'm passing by the lab at about three forty-five, half an hour after school let out. There weren't any students using the computers, because he closes the lab early on Thursdays. No reason he should, really, because he usually hangs out longer—hung out, I mean—working on his own stuff, accessing porno sites and stuff."

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"Is that true?" I ask.

"No, it's not," says Sutton.

"How would you know?" Ty says.

"I wouldn't, but you can't say something's true if it's just a rumor. If you don't know for sure, you shouldn't say it. Stick to the facts."

"Okay, okay. Anyway, I heard these loud voices coming from the computer lab. And I heard Mr. Winters say something about the 486."

"And then you just kept walking," says Sutton, exasperated.

"I didn't know he was going to be murdered, Sutt, okay? But the thing is, Mr. Gorgon, there's, like, only one 486 computer in that whole lab. When the school got 486's, they all went to the offices, y'know? For the secretaries and stuff. And they're long gone. Only one wound up in the computer lab and it's, like, obsolete. Hardly anyone ever uses it except when something's wrong with the other machines. So I'm thinking, why was Mr. Winters talking to somebody about the 486? Is there, like, maybe some clue on the 486? Or it might be important to find out who used it last. Was it, like, maybe his murderer?"

"Did you hear the voice of the other person, the one Winters was talking to?" I ask.

"Not clearly, no. Another guy. I think. Or a woman with a very deep voice. I don't think it was Sutton," he adds kiddingly.

"Forget about me," she says. "I mean, don't you dare ever forget about me, but leave me out of this because I have an alibi."

"Ty," I say, "tell me about that game you were pitching the day Sutton got suspended."

"I had, like, nothing on the ball. Lousy control, too. I was lucky to stay in the game as long as I did."

"What did you think of Mr. Winters's umpiring?"

"It was okay. I didn't, like, have a problem with it, y'know?"

"Tell the truth, Ty," says Sutton. "You're not a suspect." She turns to me, all concern. "Is he?"

"No, I don't think so. Were you conscious of the crowd?"

"If you can call a dozen people a crowd. High school baseball isn't exactly the Super Bowl, y'know? They were making plenty of noise, though, giving us a lot of support, I'll tell you that."

"Did you hear Sutton yell 'Kill the umpire'?"

Ty grins broadly. "They, like, must have heard her in the next zip code. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time. I never thought she'd get suspended or anything. I don't even know who went to Mr. Broadbutt about it, do you, Sutt?"

Sutton shakes her head.

Ty looks over at her fondly. "You know, I get goofed on about you all the time. By the other guys on the team. You yell something and they're like, 'There goes your crazy girlfriend again, Kelleher,'

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but it, like, totally doesn't bother me 'cause I know they're jealous they don't have a hot girl in the bleachers yelling at the umpire for them."

While Sutton beams, I stick to business. "Was anybody besides Sutton angry about Winters's umpiring?"

"Well, Coach Mendoza had a few things to say. They don't like each other, though. Mr. Winters used to be the head coach, and Coach Mendoza was his assistant. Coach Mendoza actually played double-A ball. I don't know if Mr. Winters even played past high school, so maybe he resented Coach Mendoza. They never did get along."

"I met Coach Mendoza," I say. "He came over from the health office with Dr. Spector."

The two teenagers exchange a meaningful glance. Sutton explains, "Not surprising. He hangs around there a lot. You know Ms. Calderon? I guess you wouldn't."

"Would that be Gladys?" I venture.

"Yeah, she's the school nurse. Coach Mendoza is, uh, involved with her."

"That's just a rumor!" Ty erupts, good-humoredly getting his own back. "You shouldn't say it if you don't know for sure."

"They are very discreet about it," Sutton says with a Mona Lisa smile. "So discreet the whole school knows. Those who pay attention."

Doubting the coach's romantic life has a bearing on the problem at hand, I ask, "Who won the game, anyway?"

"Roosevelt did," Ty says. "Their center fielder stole home in the top of the ninth. Not off me. Jerry Fujiama was pitching then."

"Close call at home plate?"

"Yeah, but a good call," Ty says grudgingly. "No complaints."

"Did Coach Mendoza think it was a good call?"

"According to Coach Mendoza, Mr. Winters never made a good call in his life. He was pretty angry." Suddenly Ty seems to realize the significance of what he's saying. "Hey, look, though, it was, like, just a ball game, y'know? I hope you don't think Coach Mendoza would kill Mr. Winters over a ball game."

"Not over a ball game," I agree. "You know anything else about Mr. Winters that might help? Does he have a family?"

Ty says, "He's divorced. His ex-wife is a lawyer or something, and they have a daughter."

"Do you know the daughter?"

Ty shakes his head. "Not really, but I've seen her around a few times. She lives with her mom and goes to private school. Kind of stuck up."

"No, she isn't," says Sutton, almost involuntarily. "She's nice."

"Do you know her, Sutton?" I ask.

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"No, not really. I've seen her around, too, that's all."

Sutton is looking very uncomfortable suddenly. Ty gives her a quizzical look. Before either of us can express any doubt verbally, she caves in.

"Okay, yes, I know her. But I've been entrusted with a confidence, and I think it's very important to respect and honor a confidence, but I also listen to Dr. Laura and I know sometimes it's important to break a confidence, such as when a friend is doing something dangerous and it's really being a better friend to tell what you know than it is to keep it a secret."

Ty, impatient with this philosophical discussion, says in a nasal falsetto, "Hello, Dr. Laura, thank you for taking my call, my name is Sutton, I am my kid's mom and here is my dilemma."

"That's not funny!" Sutton snaps. I agree it's not funny, but her reaction seems a little over the top. "I'm nobody's mom and teen parenthood is not something you should joke about, Ty, and if you're too immature to discuss serious matters seriously, maybe you should just go home!"

He gapes at her. "Are you, like, pregnant, Sutt?"

"Just get out of here!" She's red-faced, mortified, and fighting to hold off tears.

Ty looks at me helplessly. I stand up, walk toward the door, and motion to Ty to follow me.

"What's going on, Mr. Gorgon?" he demands when we're on my front porch out of earshot.

"I'm not sure. But maybe I can find out more if you're not here." I clap his shoulder. "Everything will be okay. She's crazy about you, you know, and I think you're good for each other."

"So I should just go home?" he says. "I don't want Sutt walking home alone in the dark."

It doesn't seem kind to point out she lives just three houses down and has made the walk after dark many times. "Wait out front for a few minutes, then. She may want to talk to you later."

After playing the wise elder to Ty, I go back to the living room, not nearly as confident about how or if I can help Sutton. She's sitting there, dry-eyed but pale, looking at her feet.

"*Are* you pregnant, Sutton?" I ask.

She looks up at me, first with that you-men-are-all-alike glare she'd vented on Ty, then with a softening in her sad eyes.

"No, I am *not* pregnant. I couldn't be. And Ty knows that, should know that, anyway. That's why I got so mad just now." She pauses for a moment, then looks me gravely in the eye. "Ed, what I'm going to tell you was told to me in confidence, and I have to insist—oh, forget that. It's like I'm forgetting who I'm talking to. You'll know what to do." She swallows, gathers herself, and goes on. "It's Megan who's pregnant. Megan Winters. Mr. Winters's

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daughter." Suddenly she smiles sadly. "You know what's ironic? I really liked Mr. Winters. I think he was a good man. He just sucked as an umpire, that's all."

"I've known a few good men who sucked as umpires myself. Now tell me about Megan."

"Well, like Ty said, her mother's a lawyer. Her mother is rich and I suppose nice enough in a way. But she's also very strict. Even though her mother had custody, I think Megan found her father a lot more understanding and easier to talk to about some things. She used to come and see him on campus late afternoons. One of those times I met her and we got to talking and I realized she wasn't the spoiled rich kid she seems but a really sweet person. The last time I saw her was before that baseball game where I got sort of out of control. She'd come to see her dad, and she seemed really bummed out that her dad had to umpire the game and couldn't talk to her. I saw her coming out of the computer lab and asked her what was wrong and she told me she's pregnant by this guy she knows at her oh-so-very-moral private school. I guess she doesn't have a lot of close friends over there, or maybe they were too close to home to seem safe, so she told me all about it. Of course, I said, you have to tell your mother. Surely her mother would understand. But she was terrified of her mom, like her mom would literally kill her if she got in that kind of trouble."

"So do you think she went to Mr. Winters?"

"She didn't wait around till after the game that day because she had to get home. I suppose later she might have." Sutton's eyes widened. "Do you think that could have anything to do with Mr. Winters's death? I mean, could his ex-wife have killed him?"

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe because she felt he was interfering in their daughter's life, being a bad influence, I don't know. Or, you don't think Megan killed him, do you?"

"Why, again?"

"Well—oh God, listen to me, like we're in Cabot Cove or something. I know Megan couldn't have killed him."

"Sutton, after Megan's mother came down from the ceiling, how do you think she would have handled her daughter's pregnancy?"

"She wouldn't have thrown her out of the house or anything. But she'd have wanted Megan to have the baby, that's for sure. If the father wasn't about to marry her, and believe me, he isn't, she'd probably want Megan to have the baby and put it up for adoption."

"Not the most fashionable advice nowadays."

"No, but Dr. Laura would approve."

"But how would Megan feel about it? Might she want an easier way out?"

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"I don't know if there is an easy way out, really, but yes, I suppose she would."

"And is that what she would go to her father for?"

"Maybe."

"Sutton, I've got an idea about what might have happened to Mr. Winters. But I don't know if I can do anything about your suspension."

"Oh, that," she says offhandedly. "I've about given up on that. So much has happened. But who killed Mr. Winters?"

I shake my head. "You said to Ty earlier he shouldn't spread rumors unless he's sure. I feel the same way about my theories, especially one like this that hinges on something flimsy. If it turns out to be true, you'll know soon enough, and if it isn't, I wouldn't want to harm somebody's reputation wrongly."

"Okay," she says. "I know how important reputation is, that's for sure. I feel bad about the way I yelled at Ty. That really wasn't fair, was it?"

I shrug. "A bad joke at the wrong time can make a person mad. You'll probably run into him sometime soon and be able to make things up. He's crazy about you, you know. And I think you're good for each other."

"Ed, you're not going to do anything dangerous, are you? I'd hate for you to do anything dangerous because of me. I couldn't live with myself if—"

Without pointing out she's being, like, all drama queen again, I remind her we're not in Cabot Cove and assure her I only intend to share my theory with the police. I will enter no dark alleys or deserted parking structures.

She smiles. "Ed, one other thing."

"Yes?"

"You never did ask me what my alibi is."

The morning after the murder, Broderick rescinds Sutton's suspension. I'm not sure why. According to one entertaining rumor, somebody convinces him continuing her suspension after Winters's murder makes it look like he's accusing her of the crime and thus he's opening himself up for a defamation suit. I don't believe that. I prefer to think some vestige of common sense belatedly kicks in.

After all this is over, Megan decides to have the baby on the condition she be allowed to raise it herself. She will name it Jeffrey after her dad if it's a boy. I'll let you sort out all the sentiment and irony in that.

As for the murder of Jeff Winters, the local police don't really need my reasoning to charge Dr. Andrew Spector—his school-nurse-and-patients alibi turns out to be Swiss cheese—but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing my theory is right.

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Here's how it goes down. Winters, the more indulgent parent, wants to help his daughter get an abortion while concealing from her mother that she's ever been pregnant. A surgical abortion, with the required delay, would make that hard to do, but a more discreet and immediate nonsurgical termination of the pregnancy might work. He turns to Dr. Spector, who, as Sutton says, is rumored to "help out" girls with problems they can't discuss with their parents. I correctly take that to mean he helps them procure birth control or abortions without their parents knowing. Though some might find that admirable, the good doctor's motives are not always entirely pure nor his practices in line with good medical ethics. Winters asks Spector to come by the computer lab and asks him for help with Megan's situation, but for whatever reason, Spector refuses. Winters knows a lot about the doctor's thin-ice treatment policies, and maybe he threatens to blow the whistle if the doctor won't help his daughter. Things get heated and Spector picks up the computer tower and brains Winters with it.

"The police had plenty of evidence against Spector," I tell Sutton and Ty the evening after Spector is dramatically hauled from his office under arrest. "They hardly needed my theory at all. That's the way of amateur detectives in real life, you know. Always behind the cops."

"Always, Ed?" Sutton says.

"I've heard different, too, Mr. Gorgon," says Ty.

"I've helped out occasionally," I admit, "but they didn't need me this time."

"Still, Ed," Sutton says, "when you told me the other night you had a theory, you didn't know any of that other stuff. How did you know it was Dr. Spector?"

"Thought you'd never ask." Turning to the boyfriend, I play Great Detective to the hilt. "Ty, you really did hear Winters talking to his killer."

"Did I? Far out. But why were they talking about the 486 computer?"

"They weren't. Winters wasn't talking about a computer. He was talking about something he thought Spector could provide to take care of Megan's little problem: that French abortion drug, RU-486." ●

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The Rightful King of England

by Amy Myers

Were the English *all* completely mad? Auguste Didier, safe in the comfort of knowing he was half French, fumed as he ran through the gardens of Stalisford Place, hunting for their owner, the host of this crazy assembly. It was only because Sir Henry Arthur was a member of Plum's Club for Gentlemen, for which Auguste was chef, that he had found himself agreeing to cook the feast for this day. This was partly, he conceded, because Sir Henry had ordered a medieval banquet, preceded by a lighter luncheon. Now the highlight of the evening's dinner would be ruined, for the eccentric baronet had vanished; his guests were growing hungry and somewhat concerned. They had every reason to be, in Auguste's opinion. All the members of Plum's were strange in their behaviour, but Sir Henry outstripped them all. Perhaps he had set off to blow up the Houses of Parliament?

There was no sign of him in the main garden, and Auguste had hardly expected there to be. If he was here at all, he would no doubt be found admiring the scene of his coronation, which had taken place earlier that afternoon. Auguste cautiously went through the opening in the tall yew-tree hedge that surrounded the Tudor knot garden. Jig-jagging grass paths divided the jig-jagging borders of herbs, laid out to an ancient turf-maze plan, and

Auguste Didier, Amy Myers's master chef sleuth, was born halfway across the English channel, seventeen years ago, when his creator was commuting between London (where she worked in publishing) and Paris (where she lived with her American husband). What more suitable subject for someone living in France than food? "It's easier to write about culinary masterpieces than to cook them," Ms. Myers says, so she lets Auguste do the hard work. †

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leading eventually to the centre to which the eye of the onlooker was taken.

Auguste's immediately was. His quest was over.

There, by the sundial, lay sprawled the body of the Rightful King of England.

"Didier," Sir Henry had roared in appreciation at luncheon that day. "After I'm crowned, I'll dub you knight for this. Howd'yer like that?"

Auguste had bowed his head in apparent gratitude at the tribute from this soon-to-be-crowned king of England.

"You can't dub him anything, Henry." Enid Arthur was a female version of her brother. She looked some years older, had a snappier tongue, and, if Auguste guessed right, saw no reason that women should not have equal rights to the monarchy. "He's a citizen of France, and you know what they do to aristocrats. He'll poison you before the day's out."

Auguste tried to keep his smile pleasant.

"Goddammit, I'll be crowned king in half an hour," Sir Henry roared at his sister. "I'll do what I blasted well like. Be silent or I'll have your head off. What do you say to it, Ruggles?"

Charles Ruggles, a stalwart Scottish gentleman in his early thirties, was, Auguste had gathered, special adviser on constitutional law to the present royal family, and had presumably been despatched by the Prince of Wales, on behalf of his elderly mother Queen Victoria, to dissuade Sir Henry from his rash venture. Nevertheless, Auguste was somewhat puzzled, since Ruggles bore little resemblance to any lawyer he'd ever met. Paid assassin came more to mind from the man's build and silent watchfulness.

"I doubt if the law would uphold your beheading your sister, sir," Ruggles diplomatically replied.

"Not that, you fool. What about knighting a Frenchman?" Sir Henry growled.

"There are precedents," Professor Launcelot Arthur intoned gravely. He was, Auguste had been told, Sir Henry's cousin and, as the nearest male relative, was next in line for the throne. "When I was digging in Egypt—"

"I," glared Enid, "am not a mummy."

"Launcelot," his wife Jane came in weightily to support him, "*knows* about these things." From the accounts of her exploits in the press, she was a formidable woman. While her husband ferreted underground in Egypt, his wife donned thick bloomers and boots and strode up mountains. They looked at least ten years younger than Sir Henry, and therefore could probably look forward to some years wearing the crown. Auguste caught himself

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impatiently—twenty-four hours in this household were affecting his own brain.

Launcelot looked smug at his wife's tribute. "I'll make you a member of the Order of the Blue Lotus, Didier, when I'm king. Ever tried cooking with blue lotus?"

"No, sir," Auguste murmured, trying to inch slowly backwards out of the dining hall. "Thank you, sir."

Enid snorted. "You won't cook for us again. I don't trust foreigners with our food."

Auguste decided it was time to put an end to this charade. He ignored the slur and addressed his host from the doorway: "You're most kind, Sir Henry, but I seek no knighthood. My reward is in giving pleasure to those who eat my cuisine."

It was a well-used phrase, though he meant it, and usually had its effect in extracting him from awkward situations. Not this time.

"Tell you what," Sir Henry offered, inspired. "You can lead the coronation procession, Didier. Old Venables won't mind, will you?" He turned to his least objectionable guest.

The Reverend William Venables, rector of Stalisford, whose living was in the gift of Sir Henry, hastily shook his head. "No, sir." To him would fall the honour of crowning the new monarch, but his silence and woebegone face suggested he was not looking forward to it, and would be only too glad to cede this function to Auguste as well.

"Thank you, Sir Henry," Auguste muttered in resignation.

"Bang the gong, then, there's a good chap," Sir Henry boomed. "Time to get going."

Demoted from knight to butler, Auguste crossly went into the passageway to obey. It appeared the gong was the arranged signal for the entire staff of Stalisford Place (twenty-eight indoor and fifteen outdoor) to form a corridor outside the front entrance of the house. At the end of it, the "Royal" Golden Coach (one of Sir Henry's carriages smothered in gold paint) awaited its owner. The procession now approached. Sir Henry, bearing a look of the utmost gravity and clad in a coronation robe of purple velvet edged with white fur, climbed into the coach alone. It was Auguste's lot to walk before the two horses, whose breath was increasingly close behind him, as if they could not wait to get back to their stables. Enid followed the coach with Charles Ruggles, Launcelot and Jane strode behind, and the long robes of the Reverend Venables flapped miserably round his legs as he brought up the rear. The carriage set off at a slow, dignified pace round the house to its rear and then took the long winding path down to the knot garden.

There Sir Henry stepped down from the carriage in regal fashion and marched along the twisting grass paths to the centre mound of the garden. The rest of the party fell in behind him,

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picking their way cautiously over the narrow paths. The shadow on the sundial proclaimed it was about two-thirty, and the engraved motto on its side: "How quickly the pleasant days have passed away." Personally Auguste couldn't wait for this one to end. It was too high a price to pay even for the pleasure of presenting dressed peacock, flower-garden salad, and curd cheese tarts.

Two of the gardeners were standing ready for the signal to reveal the sundial's recently discovered treasure. Auguste had not seen it, but it was on this that Sir Henry's claim was based and which Ruggles was to inspect. Sir Henry climbed onto his throne, placed at the sundial's side. Originally a humble wooden chair, for this day of glory it had been painted gold, adorned with golden cushions, and surmounted by a cloth of gold embroidered "King Henry IX."

"Get on with it," Sir Henry impatiently ordered his men, who were labouring to pull the entire sundial aside to reveal an ancient box which it had been concealing within its hollow centre.

"I'll take a wee look at that." Charles Ruggles strode forward.

"Doubtful of my claim, are you?" Sir Henry growled. "No need. The marriage was legal all right, and here's the proof."

Suddenly Auguste ceased to think of this as a boring farce. It had become all too real, and there were some intense passions at stake. This dotty family, craning eagerly towards the box, really believed in its heritage. Even in its age-worn state, the box's lid still boasted the initials MA, for Lady Margaret Arthur, daughter of the Earl of Stalisford.

"Come here, Didier," ordered the king-to-be. Auguste's heart sank. He had hoped to be able to melt into the background like butter in a hot sauce. "Open the box and give Venables the crown."

Genuinely curious, Auguste obeyed. The crown within the box gleamed, for it had already been cleaned and replaced for the occasion. It was hardly a rival to King Edward's crown, being little more than a diadem, but it was undoubtedly gold. Next to it, lying on a velvet cushion, was a ring, a woven circle of golden strands, with a sapphire and ruby set into it.

"The Ring of Kingly Dignity. Part of my regalia." Sir Henry's eyes gleamed.

"Where's the proof of the marriage?" Charles Ruggles asked quietly.

"Get out the register, Didier."

Venables showed somewhat more interest as Auguste lifted out the decaying volume from the bottom of the box. The parish priests of Stalisford had been unusually zealous in obeying the edict from King Henry VIII to keep registers of births, marriages, and deaths. The registers from mid-1540 onwards had been impeccably maintained, but the register from 1538, the year of the edict, to the early part of 1540 was missing from the church records—if,

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of course, it had ever existed. It had, and here it now was, a trifle sorry for itself, but still clearly legible. Auguste watched Sir Henry gleefully turn the pages and give it to Charles Ruggles. "Here you are, complete with the tick to show royalty's involved. 'November fourteenth fifteen thirty-eight: Henry Tudor to Margaret Arthur,' and in the same handwriting a note, 'Daughter of the Earl Stalisford to Henry the Eighth of England.'"

"I should have succeeded after Edward the Sixth died," his descendant claimed, "and before those women robbed me of my throne."

"You weren't there at the time," Enid pointed out. "And why shouldn't women come to the throne?"

"If I'd been king then, I wouldn't have had all those executions, for a start. Except for you, maybe," her brother snarled at her. "If you look at the end of the register, Ruggles, you'll find their son's baptism: Bedivere Tudor, sixteenth September 'thirty-nine. And Margaret's death three weeks later."

Auguste knew that every year Sir Henry celebrated the day on which by his rights he should have succeeded to the throne, the day of Edward VI's death, 6 July 1553. This coronation, however, was taking place in early June, and no doubt this was an added reason for Ruggles's presence, since Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee would be taking place very shortly.

"Any objections, Ruggles?" Sir Henry boomed. "You've no need to worry. I'll see Victoria's treated well. She can keep Osborne and Balmoral, if she likes. I'll take the Palace and Windsor."

"No objection, sir," Charles Ruggles replied.

"It'll be Your Majesty in a few minutes," Henry chortled proudly. "Let the coronation proceed. Step forward, Venables."

Auguste had gathered that the coronation service as held in Westminster Abbey was an extremely long process, and had been fearing that the evening's feast would be kept waiting for many hours. He need not have worried. The king-to-be had written his own service.

Two musicians, whom Auguste recognised as underfootmen dressed in doublet and hose for the occasion, stepped forward with lutes, while two trumpets sounded a fanfare outside the garden; between them, to the best of their ability given this inadequate orchestra, they played "The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba," "Hallelujah Chorus," and "Greensleeves" in strict rotation over and over again.

The Reverend Venables cast a look of desperation at Auguste, stepped forward, and began to gabble.

"Speak up!" Jane Arthur roared. "Launcelot is the heir after all."

"Not before I'm dead," Enid snarled. "I come next, don't I, Mr. Ruggles?"

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"I think constitutionally—" Ruggles said hesitantly.

"I don't think constitutionally," she snapped. "I think equality."

"I'd make a better monarch," Launcelot said belligerently.

"And so you shall," his wife said fondly. "You're a lot younger than Henry. You'll rule for years."

"Do you mind waiting till I'm dead?" Henry hissed. "I haven't even been crowned yet."

Venables cleared his throat, and began again to read from the long parchment declaration he had been handed.

"Our new king presents his right to rule the kingdoms of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, and the countries of the British Empire. In fifteen thirty-seven the dearly beloved wife of his ancestor Henry the Eighth, Jane Seymour, died after giving birth to the future Edward the Sixth. Henry mourned her fully six months, but reluctantly realised that it was his duty to marry again; the babe was sickly and he had no other male heir. When he fell in love, however, it was with Lady Margaret Arthur, daughter of the Catholic Earl of Stalisford. Henry truly loved Margaret but was forced to wed her in secret. The newly formed Church of England, which he himself had so recently created in order to divorce his Catholic wife, could hardly countenance another Catholic wife so soon after its establishment, and most certainly not any heir she might bear."

"Hurry up," interrupted Sir Henry.

Venables cast him a scared look and doubled his pace: "In the unlikely event that his son Edward died without issue, the country would accept Edward's Catholic elder sister as monarch, because she was born before he had created the new church, but they would not accept Bedivere. The church would be doomed. Alas, Margaret, too, died in childbirth in October fifteen thirty-nine. Henry, while sincerely mourning Margaret, realised it was his duty to marry again. Four months later he married the Protestant Anne of Cleves, but as is well known, he did not live with her. And why not? Not, as tradition says, because she was ugly, but because he remained devoted to the memory of Margaret. It sincerely grieved him to condemn to death for religious reasons the Earl of Stalisford and the priest who had performed the marriage ceremony in fifteen thirty-eight. When Henry later married again for love, he honoured the memory of Margaret by placing a crown and ring where earlier they had hidden the register containing the truth of their marriage. It was then that the sundial gained its loving inscription: 'How quickly passed the pleasant days.' Henry loved her so much he wanted Margaret's child or child's children to inherit when the country was ready for a Catholic ruler again. He has waited many years, but now, thanks be to God, who works

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in mysterious ways, his dream has come true and the descendants of Bedivere Tudor will sit upon the throne of England."

This did not seem to reflect the King Henry VIII as known to history, Auguste thought, but perhaps there had indeed been a nicer side to his nature than wife-butcher.

The Reverend Venables then shook out another huge parchment roll on which was a family tree proving Henry Arthur's descent from Margaret Arthur.

"And what's more," Henry shouted in defiance of all coronation etiquette, "I didn't get the name Arthur by accident. Lady Margaret was descended from the great King of England."

"That's how I came to be called Launcelot. I shall be," said the professor in some awe, "King Launcelot the First of England."

"I'll be Queen Enid first," snapped Enid .

"And I *am* King Henry the Ninth," roared the pending king. "Put that crown on, Venables."

"I crown thee King of England, in the eyes of God, the present so-called Royal family, your dearly beloved family here assembled, and the people of this nation." The rector picked up the diadem and nervously placed it on the new king's head as Ruggles stirred uneasily.

"I canna think—"

"Be quiet," Enid snapped. "We all have to shout 'God Save the King' now."

A weak chorus ensued, with the musicians and gardeners looking uncertain as to whether they were of sufficient rank to join in.

"You canna claim Scotland," Ruggles pointed out. "It wasn't united with England then."

"It is now," Sir Henry retorted. "I'm emperor of half the world."

"What about Egypt?" Launcelot asked eagerly. "I'd like to be king of that."

"We don't formally rule it," Ruggles murmured.

"If I have anything to do with it, you'll have it, darling," Jane declared.

"Anoint me, Venables," snarled Henry.

"No, sir," Venables quavered. "I cannot do that. This is not holy oil."

"That should have come before the crowning." Ruggles seemed to be getting into the spirit of the thing now, to Auguste's amusement.

"This is my service, not yours. Bless the oil, then, Venables, and then dab it on."

Venables, clearly expecting his head to be removed with a garden scythe, bravely replied again, "No, sir."

"All right," Henry glared. "Then put the Kingly Ring upon my

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finger, give me the orb and sceptre, and then everyone can pay me homage. You, too, Didier."

To Auguste, a farce should stuff a goose, not provide antics on a summer afternoon. This additional service would be reflected in the size of his bill.

Hitherto he had assumed that the gardeners were leaning on sticks, but now he saw, as they hastily pushed them into Venables's arms for onward passage to the new king, an iron sword obviously removed from the ancestral collection in the smoking room, and what seemed to be a poker with an improvised orb of paper surmounted by a cross stuck on its end. It made a strange contrast with the undoubtedly genuine golden crown, but after Venables had clasped the ring upon his finger, the new monarch received them eagerly enough.

"Enid," barked her new monarch, "you begin the homage."

She walked forward, glaring at her brother. "I do thee homage, King Henry, but only until women have their due rights. I am, after all, the elder of us." She extended her hands clasped palm to palm, and her brother snatched them firmly within his—after a short delay to tuck the orb and sceptre behind him. She was followed by Launcelot and Jane carrying out the same ritual.

"Ruggles," the new king then demanded.

"As a solicitor, working for the other side, so to speak," he replied hastily, "I must remain an onlooker."

"Damned traitor," Henry muttered. "Didier?"

"I'm half French, sir."

"Then the other half can blasted well pay me homage."

In the interests of his bill, Auguste forfeited his pride. After all, as Ruggles must know perfectly well, this man was hardly going to raise an army and march on Buckingham Palace. He extended his hands, and two palms clapped them triumphantly inside his, grinding them so hard the ring dug into Auguste's hand. It seemed a small price to pay for the sake of keeping his host happy for the dressed peacock.

After the body of the new king had been removed, Auguste still lingered in the knot garden. Shaken himself, he was appalled that the shock of this death was producing not sorrow from the late king's subjects, but squabbling over who should be his successor. Ruggles, too, was lingering, perhaps to see fair play as Enid, Launcelot, and Jane pitched fierce battle. The death had been attributed by the Arthurs to a fit brought on by overexcitement, but the doctor had not been convinced. It was, in his opinion, a case of acute gastric fever, brought on by adulterated food. All eyes had centred on Auguste, whose luncheon was the obvious suspect. He had had a few well-chosen words with the doctor, pointing out

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that a sole au Chablis, roast chicken, and strawberry bavarois were unlikely to produce such symptoms, and that in his experience of working with Inspector Rose of Scotland Yard, further investigation at least through the coroner and probably by the police might be an excellent idea, especially since it was a diplomatically sensitive gathering. The Kent police had duly arrived and had now left.

There were factors at play here that Auguste did not quite understand, and if Sir Henry had indeed been murdered (or rather assassinated, since he claimed to be a king), then he had to find out how this had happened very quickly if he were to avoid the Tower of London as his next residence.

The first step in his own interests would be to alert Egbert Rose to the strange situation at Stalisford Place. After that telephone call, he returned briefly to the kitchen to prevent any further disposal of the remains of luncheon, and to scale down the planned feast to something more suitable to the occasion. He bade a regretful farewell to the dressed peacock and then set off to inform the company that dinner would be served in half an hour and to make discreet enquiries as to what had happened during the afternoon. On the way to carry out this mission, he met Charles Ruggles in the corridor, whom he buttonholed for his support.

"They're all off their trolleys," was Ruggles's surprising response, "but I agree there's something odd happening, so you can rely on me."

Legal advisers to royalty would not ordinarily go out of their way to collaborate with chefs, which further confirmed Auguste's suspicions, which he had shared with Egbert Rose.

"You work with Mr. Lewis, do you not?" he asked Ruggles.

"Who?"

"The Prince of Wales's solicitor," Auguste replied innocently.

"Ah." Ruggles laughed. "So you think I'm not a lawyer by profession, but a paid assassin, Mr. Didier. Wrong. When the prince's secretary received the letter from Sir Henry informing him of this charade, it was decided that someone should come down to investigate. With the Queen's Jubilee so shortly due, we wanted no disturbance, or, dare one say, assassination attempt. The timing seemed too close for coincidence."

In the drawing room, the battle was still in full flow when they entered, and only the mention of dinner brought a brief pause.

"Mr. Didier tells me it's possible Scotland Yard might become involved if they find evidence of gastric poisoning in Sir Henry's body," Ruggles informed them blandly.

"Really?" Enid was delighted. "Henry would have liked that honour."

"He's trying to distract attention from his cooking," snapped

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Jane. "Don't be a fool, Enid."

"*Queen* Enid, if you don't mind. I am now Queen of England."

"Nonsense," said Launcelot roundly.

"Speaking for the Prince of Wales—" Ruggles attempted.

"Former prince," Jane pointed out.

"Very well. Let us agree on Regent of Wales while you are settling the constitutional position here. We should be clear as to where Sir Henry was this afternoon in case it transpires that murder is involved."

There were surprised looks, but no one seemed disposed to disagree with this. "We were all here, of course, save Mr. Venables and Mr. Ruggles," Enid said. "Henry was planning to rule with me as I was next to succeed."

"Like the Egyptians," Launcelot observed.

"I thought they married their sisters," Jane muttered.

"It's immaterial," Enid began, but was interrupted by Auguste's gentle:

"Were you all here all the time?"

"At one time or another," Jane airily replied.

"The coronation ended about three-thirty," Jane said. "We all came back to the drawing room then."

"Sir Henry too?"

"Certainly," Enid said vigorously. "Henry was with us for about an hour, then said he did not feel well and would go for a walk in the gardens. We realised he wished to be alone to ponder the great responsibilities of state."

"And no one saw him again?" Ruggles asked.

"Where were you?" Launcelot asked quickly. "Venables went home, but you weren't with us at first, either. You didn't join us for another half-hour or so. *And* you went out again ten minutes ago."

"Your first point isna relevant, since Sir Henry was here, and the second was a mere call of nature. Hardly enough time to reach the knot garden, poison Sir Henry, and return here."

"And what about you?" Auguste asked the new queen and her dissident relations-in-law. "Did you remain together all the time? Were there any more—" he paused delicately—"brief absences?"

"Certainly I went to the water closet," Enid informed him loftily, "but that absence, too, failed to give me time to poison my brother."

"This," proclaimed Jane, "is ridiculous. Any poison reacting on Henry so quickly would have been given to him at luncheontime."

"But a murderer could not count on knowing who was to be served and with what," Auguste pointed out.

"Precisely. That is why," Enid snapped, "it is clearly the food at fault. Did I not warn poor Henry that you would poison him before the day was out?"

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Auguste struggled for calm. "No one else has fallen ill," he commented reasonably.

A pause in which all four considered this point.

"The drinks?" Launcelot ventured.

"No," Auguste said. "Sir Henry sat at one end of the table. Anyone reaching over to put anything in his wine would have been noticed. The risk was too great."

"It still looks uncommonly as though you are the murderer, Mr. Didier," Enid said gleefully. "Only you or one of the other servants could have leaned over my poor brother to drop poison in his food or wine without causing comment."

"Unless all three of you acted together," Ruggles suggested to her.

This caused uproar. "A typical suggestion from a representative of the Saxe-Coburgs," snarled Launcelot.

"I think you may safely assume, Mr. Ruggles," Enid put on her best queenly voice, "that we are too divided over our future to conspire together. Scotland Yard—if it becomes involved—will leave empty-handed or with you in handcuffs, Mr. Didier."

The dinner safely served, Auguste walked into the gardens to get away from the gloomy atmosphere of the house. It was dusk and the scent of the roses was strong. It was hard to realise that unnatural death had taken place here earlier this day, and harder even to imagine that a murderer might be sleeping within those walls tonight. So far as he could see, there had been no opportunity for any of the three Arthurs to poison Sir Henry, assuming the poison used caused a fairly quick reaction. That left Ruggles—and yet he, as Egbert Rose had just confirmed, was with Special Branch, who had no need to murder to achieve their ends. A gentle tap on the shoulder and a threatening letter from solicitor George Lewis would have sufficed.

He wandered into the knot garden. The orb and sword lay discarded by the sundial, and the box had been thrown carelessly to one side. The crown, he knew, was in Enid's keeping, but to his surprise, the register still lay in the box. Venables had clearly been too overwrought to take it with him, but who, Auguste wondered, had replaced it so neatly in its former home?

For a moment Auguste speculated with the idea of Venables as a murderer. After all, a mad rector would match a mad lord of the manor. He dismissed the idea, and opened the register, turning to the page where the marriage was recorded. With a sense of inevitability, he saw that it was now missing, as were the other two relevant pages; they had been roughly torn out, and were nowhere to be seen. Ruggles's mission was now quite obvious. He

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or Venables had to be the murderer, if murder it proved to be—and of the two . . . But how had he done it, and why?

Auguste went to sleep that night, his brain buzzing with possibilities that rapidly turned into improbabilities. Ruggles may have torn out the register pages, but that would remove the reason for any murder. Without such evidence, Sir Henry's antics would be foiled.

In his dreams, Auguste ran round and round the labyrinthine paths of the maze, but never reached the centre. Each turn of the path produced a different thought. What had poor Queen Margaret felt about her wedding remaining secret, as she was hidden away to bear her child? What had Henry VIII's thoughts been as he added the crown and ring to the concealed register after her death? And at whose hand had the descendant of Bedivere's line met his death, probably by arsenic, the favourite poisoner's weapon of past and present?

Round and round Auguste ran on the grass paths in his dreams, until at last an idea emerged out of the ghosts of the past.

In the morning he telephoned Inspector Rose once more.

"I've had the scientists' postmortem report. They were at it all night. Arsenic," Egbert Rose informed him. "You can start looking for your murderer before we arrive."

"You will need to check, but I believe I have found him."

"Good. Who?"

"You could say all of us."

"What? Trust you to make it difficult."

"The idea came from the Medicis, who had interesting methods of poisoning their victims in order to leave a trace so delicate it would not be noticed. This was one of them. I believe you will find a needlepoint contained in the ring on Sir Henry's finger with a mechanism triggered by pressure on the hands—such as that caused by the friction involved in acts of homage at a coronation ceremony. We all killed Sir Henry, but we were guiltless of intent."

"So whose intent was it?"

"The murderer was King Henry the Eighth of England. He of the Seven Wives." ●

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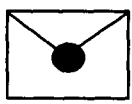

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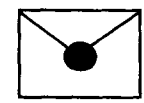

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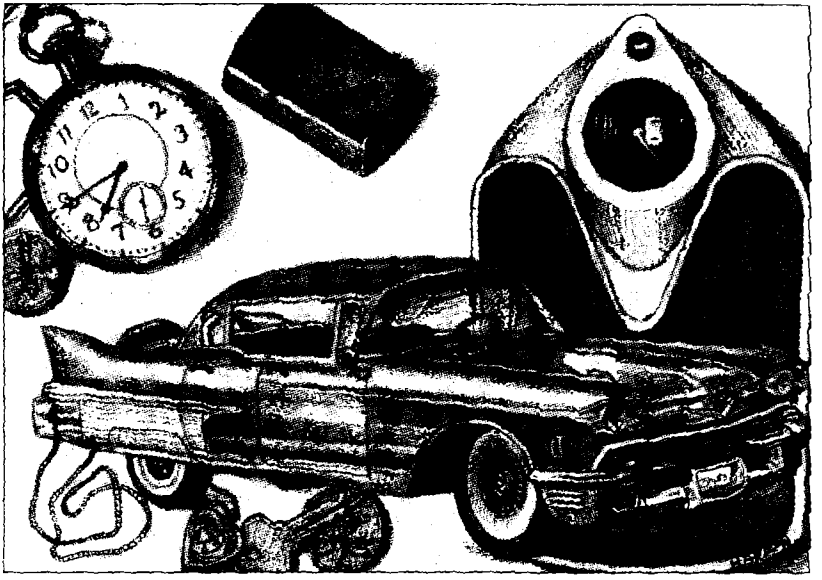

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BILLY, CUTTER, AND THE CADILLAC

by Antony Mann

Tom Cutter was too fat for his own good in the sense that, coupled with his simple outlook on life, it made him an easy target, especially for his friends. We drank with him because we had grown up with him, Billy Hudson, Mick Dalton, and me. Billy was the flash one, loud and nasty. A real slick sociopath was Billy, largely unconscious of the world around him, yet thanks to his wayward charisma the unspoken leader of our little group. I sometimes wondered if on job application forms, in the space they provide for hobbies, Billy didn't write "cruelty." But that was no matter. It was only ever a bit of a laugh up at The Carpenters on a Friday night.

The pub we considered ours was on Lime Street between the deli and the hardware store. Behind baskets heavy with ivy and petunias, black beams crisscrossed its high white facade. In the

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last decade the whole area seemed to have slunk upmarket under our noses. Good for property prices, not so good for the soul. Yet—whether out of laziness or perversity it was not clear—the owner of The Carpenters Arms had so far resisted the siren call to gentrification. Our local had remained so, and avoided the transformation into some overcooked designer's idea of a good time.

The place was narrow and long inside, done out in olive green and off-white. The ceiling was high. The wallpaper might have been partly obscured behind generic sepia prints of horse-drawn buggies and garden sheds circa 1900, procured in bulk from nostalgia merchants, but the place had atmosphere. That Friday it was packed with students who had let themselves off the leash, loud but inoffensive in the main.

In his second story for *EQMM*, Antony Mann, of Oxford, England, creates a bone-chilling effect using the cozy ambiance of an English pub. Mr. Mann is very original in his choice of themes, as readers who saw his earlier story for us, "The Oedipus Variation," will recall. The author is a winner of Britain's most distinguished award for short crime fiction, the Short Story Dagger.

The landlord's wife was picking up empty glasses. She was a small, thin woman in her late forties. Her hair was straight brown turning grey, and she favoured clothes to match, durable and plain. Her husband was taller, broad-shouldered and solid like a tree. They were friendly enough, and they made it pleasant for the drinkers, but there was something small-minded and bitter about them, as though life had never quite panned out the way it should.

From our table at the back, I watched Mick Dalton through the smoke haze. Tall and sallow-faced and looking older than his thirty-five, he stood among the students at the bar, chatting with the landlord while he got the beers in. Cutter sat beside me.

"So guess what?" Billy was saying. Dressed sharp and tight as he always was, he sat across the table, his back to the noise. At thirty-one, he was the youngest of the four of us, and the shortest. He was nuggety and compact, his wavy hair dark and cropped. He turned a calculating eye on Cutter, who was where he always was, in the corner facing out into the bar—the best vantage point for staring at the girls he would never kiss.

"What?" said Cutter.

"I got a new Cadillac."

"You what?" Cutter was thirty-three. His fat hands sat limply on the cigar box in his lap. His straight brown hair tended to flop down over his forehead, and his eyes were piggy small, made to

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look even more so by his large, rectangular face. It emphasized his lack of intellect. He was near enough to eighteen stone, which on a medium frame is big.

"Piss off, Billy," I said.

"You can piss off," he said.

"What happened? You win the lottery?" I thought he was making it up, but he wasn't.

"In a funny sort of a way, I guess I did." Billy smiled to himself at the thought. "My Uncle Fred died of cancer. Turns out he liked me more than I liked him." He took a set of car keys from his jacket pocket and dangled them in front of us. "Thanks, Fred."

Cutter had his eyes on the keys as they swung back and forth, angles and edges reflecting the dull pub light. Mick came back with the drinks, weaving his way through the clutter of undergrads. Setting the tray down on the table, he sat beside Billy, then produced tobacco and papers from a pocket and proceeded to construct a cigarette. He glanced at the keys.

"He's told you, then."

"Nineteen fifty-eight pink Cadillac convertible," Billy was saying. "Completely rebuilt."

"How about that?" I said.

"Completely rebuilt?" echoed Cutter. "What about the trim? What's the trim like?"

"Cadillac's no good around here," said Mick, running his tongue along the gummed edge of the paper. "Streets are too narrow. Nowhere to park it."

"Park it? I had it *valued* this morning." Billy's fingers snapped closed around the keys, which a moment later slid back into his jacket. Cutter watched them go. "I'm going to sell it. I could do with twenty grand."

"Twenty thousand?" I whistled softly.

"Billy's round," said Mick.

"For the next ten bloody years it's Billy's round," I said.

Cutter frowned. He took the cigar box from his lap and placed it gently on the table in front of him, teasing at the lid with his fingertips. "You shouldn't sell it."

"What did you say, Tom?" asked Billy sharply, turning on Cutter as though he had been waiting for the opportunity. Cutter stared at his cigar box, avoiding Billy's gaze.

"People shouldn't be allowed to do things like that," he murmured.

"Shouldn't be allowed?" The hard glare was coming into Billy's eyes now. I had seen it many times before, often fuelled by the booze, just as often not. It wasn't temper, it was too calculated for that. At the same time, he was all but unaware of it. That, or he truly didn't care. An outside stimulus would trip a mechanism inside him, flick a switch, and a process would begin. He wasn't after an effect, he was

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just being himself. "Shouldn't be *allowed,* Tommy?"

In his own way, even though he copped it worst, Cutter was best at standing up to him. He shrugged.

"Maybe not. Maybe you should think of your friends."

"Friends like you."

Cutter said nothing.

"Go easy," said Mick. He twisted the end of the cigarette and put it to his lips, striking a match. A tobacco strand glowed for an instant before shrivelling and falling to the table.

Billy kept on at Cutter, "You know, I'd *give* you the car, except you're too fat to fit behind the wheel."

"No I'm not. I could lose some weight. Why do you want to sell such a nice thing?"

"Like your nice things? Is that what you mean? Come on, Tom, let's have a look, then. Open up. Show us what you've got tonight."

Hesitant and secretive, no matter that he had performed the same ritual for us hundreds of times, Cutter pushed the cigar box into the centre of the table and carefully lifted the lid. Despite ourselves, Mick and I craned forward in our seats to see. It was a box of junk—Cutter's junk—but looking at it always made me feel the same, as though I were leafing through a diary, reading someone's most intimate thoughts.

It was the same old array of baubles—familiar because we had seen them all before, but mainly because it was we who had donated them. There was Mick's old copper snake ring that Cutter had begged for so many times, eventually wearing him down. Next to it was the broken Zippo lighter which, thinking of Cutter, I'd picked up at a jumble sale for ten pence. There was the allergic-to-penicillin bracelet my sister used to wear, and a tarnished copper Celtic knot amulet on a leather thong. Billy had chipped in with a locket on a fine silver chain and a pre-war shilling or two. In a corner of the box, however, was something that we hadn't seen before, something new, whether by accident or design partly hidden by Cutter's hand.

It was a heavy-looking gold-plated fob watch, and it was ticking so loud that despite the noise of the pub we could all hear it.

"What's that, Tom?" said Billy.

"Nothing," said Cutter.

"Under your hand."

Reluctantly, Cutter drew his hand away, wincing as Billy reached over and picked up the watch by its chain. It had the look of the genuine article, solid and well-crafted, a shop-window antique. Billy opened the gold case and checked the time against his own wrist watch, then snapped shut the lid and hefted the timepiece in his hand.

"Must be worth a bit," he said. "Where'd you get it?"

"I bought it," said Cutter.

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Billy laughed, "Steal it, did you?"

"No."

"Did you know that stolen property is fair game? Because you can't report it to the police. Somebody steals something off you what *you* stole, and the only comeback is to crack them on the head."

"Leave it, Billy," I said.

He gave me a sharp, ugly glance.

"Yeah, I'll leave it," he said, "it's just that I was thinking that Tom has something I want, and he wants something of mine. Hear what I'm saying, Tom?"

"I want my watch back," said Cutter sullenly.

"I thought you wanted the Cadillac. What about that?"

"You'd never make that swap," I said.

"No way," said Billy. "What's in that for me? I'm talking about a bet. Tom's too fat to get behind the wheel of the Cadillac, but he says he can lose some weight. I don't believe he can. Let's see who's right. I'll bet the car against the watch that Tom can't lose the weight."

"How much weight?" said Mick.

"Not much," said Billy. "Seven pounds. In a week."

Billy was right. It wasn't much. With a Cadillac at stake, it would have been easy for Mick or me. But for Cutter, it was a mountain. Billy laid the gold watch flat on the table, then took the car keys from his pocket and set them down alongside.

"Well, Tom? What do you say?"

"You don't have to," said Mick. "That's a nice watch there. Best thing you've got."

Cutter nodded. He thought about it, looking doubtfully from the fob watch to the keys and back again. Through his T-shirt he squeezed the folds of his flesh as though he were kneading dough, measuring, weighing.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Nineteen fifty-eight convertible?"

Billy nodded.

"What about the upholstery?"

"Beige. In good nick."

Cutter shot Billy a sly look, then, "Is it manual or automatic?"

Billy let out a derisory laugh. "Automatic," he said.

"All right," said Cutter. "It's a bet. Shake on it."

Billy took his hand. "Oh, there's something else I didn't mention. Every night for the next week, we meet here at eight. And on Friday we have the weigh-in here in the pub, too. Okay?"

Clever. Not only could Cutter not spend the allotted seven days in a health farm or similar—unlikely, but not impossible—he would also have to contend with the nightly temptation of beer.

"Not fair, Billy," I said. "You didn't say that before."

"It's all right," said Cutter. He let go of Billy's hand. Billy looked pretty satisfied as he reached out for his keys, but Mick beat him

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to it. Before Billy could stop him, he whisked both them and the gold watch off the table and dropped them into his shirt pocket.

"Wait on!" Billy snapped. "Those are mine!"

"Not anymore they're not," said Mick in a tone that suggested he meant it. "Not until next Friday. Who knows? Maybe not then, either. Unless you want to call off the bet." He looked at Cutter, hopefully. "Same goes for you, Tom. You both get one chance to call it off. What do you say? We wouldn't think any less of you."

"No, it's okay," said Cutter, shooting a wistful look towards Mick's pocket where his watch had ended up.

"Then the bet stands," said Billy. He clapped his hands together and smiled, then glanced at Cutter's bulging gut. "Right. Can I get you another beer, Tom? You're looking a bit empty there."

"Thanks, Billy," Cutter smiled back. "Thanks very much."

The next seven days passed quickly—too quickly for Cutter. That first evening after last drinks the four of us made our way on foot back to Mick's place for the preliminary weigh-in. We were hammered from the evening's boozing and, with the earlier unpleasantness forgotten, the idea of the wager had become something of a joke between friends. We did our best not to wake Mick's Dulcie, who was not opposed to drink per se but who disapproved of its effect on her husband, but there are few who would have slept through the shout that went up as Cutter stepped onto the scales in Mick's bathroom. It didn't help much either that the walls were thin.

Not counting the two pounds we took off for his clothes—including socks, but not shoes—Cutter tipped the scales at seventeen stone nine, give or take an ounce. It seemed a lot, but using the curious logic of the drunk I swiftly came to the conclusion that because he weighed so much, Cutter would have no trouble winning the bet.

"You'll lose those seven pounds easily," I slurred in encouragement, slapping him on the back. Mick agreed wholeheartedly.

"He's right, Tom. You're a shoo-in. The more a man weighs, the easier it is to lose it. Because he has more to lose."

"Stands to reason," Billy nodded solemnly. "Must be hard going on a diet if you're thin."

"Maybe that's why thin people don't diet," I said. As we stood crammed into the tiny bathroom pondering this dubious wisdom, Dulcie appeared in the doorway. She was a small woman, but standing there barefoot in her nightgown at one in the morning with her arms folded and the look in her eyes daring us to utter even one word, she seemed a lot bigger. She didn't say a thing. She ended our little party with a jerk of her head in the direction of the front door. We tiptoed out into the night, all except Mick, who responded to our whispered goodbyes with a shrug of resignation and a feeble, chastised smile.

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Each of the next six nights we met at The Carpenters Arms, and each night Cutter kept up, matching us drink for drink until closing time. In fact, with Billy plying him with beer and crisps at every opportunity, he consumed *more* than we did, and by Thursday evening it was plain that Cutter was going to lose. It was no big deal. It was what I had thought from the start, and it was arguably for the best. When you got down to it, a watch wasn't worth a Cadillac, and maybe Billy was only scoring points. After the bet he would most likely just hand the fob back, with the whole exercise amounting to no more than a futile demonstration of his cleverness.

He was in good spirits, Billy. He'd been making a show of his old wrist watch all week, complaining how it ran slow or didn't run at all, pointing out to anyone who would listen the blemishes and scratches on the glass and the leather strap. At various times he had offered it for sale, and one night had even staged a mock auction. "No offers over twenty pence!" he had shouted to raucous cheers from the gallery.

On Thursday, after getting in the last orders, he plonked himself down at the table and took the watch off. We were all full of beer. Cutter was poking through the trinkets in his cigar box while Mick and I sat huddled in sodden conversation. Billy gave an overloud sigh, and slid the wrist watch over to Cutter.

"Sorry to see this baby go," he said with a rueful shake of his head. "It's stood by me through thick and thin. Doctors appointments, football kickoff times, assorted egg boilings. But you take it, Tom. Have it for your collection."

Cutter looked up from the depths of his treasure trove.

"I already have a watch," he said. "Mick's minding it for me."

Mick and I ceased our muttering about the injustices of whatever it was we were decrying.

"Take it, Tom," said Billy, in his best impersonation of a generous fellow. Cutter rolled his eyes and laughed sloppily, as he always did when he was thinking up a joke.

"But you'll need it so you won't miss the bus," he said at last through a mile-wide grin.

It would have been funnier if it were true, but Mick and I still laughed. Only Billy didn't. Instead, he sneered.

"You had your chance," he said.

"You had your chance," Cutter repeated softly, testing the words.

It was crucial to the fairness of the wager that consistency be maintained in the measurements. At six-thirty on Friday evening Mick and I duly turned up at The Carpenters with Dulcie's bathroom scales. We were not the only ones ahead of time. During the week, word had spread. I suppose it was a change from quiz nights, but the early crowd that propped up the bar had something of a

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sour voyeuristic feel to it. I understood then why Billy had wanted the weigh-in to be held at the pub. There was the added bonus of being able to humiliate Cutter in public if he wanted.

I noticed the chalkboard while I was buying the beers. Odds of Cutter having *gained* weight were 1-4, blown out from evens, although you could get 2-1 if you thought he'd put on over three pounds, and 6-1 for more than five. It was a 10-1 bet that he'd lost any weight at all.

"So what price Cutter wins the Cadillac?" I asked the landlord's wife as she flicked the taps off. She gave me an odd look.

"We haven't taken any money on that one," she said as she handed me my change. She winked and lowered her voice, "You're a regular, so here's a tip. We've been keeping a tally of how many more beers he's drunk than usual. We think he's put on two pounds. It's in the range of what most are saying anyway, but there's enough going for the bigger money so's that we'll make a tidy profit."

Cutter was a regular, too.

"So you're not taking bets on him to win," I said, pissed off.

"I suppose so, but nobody would really . . ."

"Give me a price," I said.

She shrugged. "Hundreds?"

"Here's a fiver." I extracted the note from my wallet.

"It's your money," she said indifferently, tucking it into her pocket. She scrawled the new odds on the chalkboard, "Cutter to Win 100-1." Someone beside me saw her do it and laughed.

By the time Billy arrived half an hour later, the mob had grown restless waiting for the big event. As he walked in, an odd, spontaneous half-shout rose up, as though the crowd didn't know exactly what they were cheering for. Billy grinned anyway and saluted. He stopped for a laugh and a back slap, then made his way through to where Mick and I sat at the back.

"You bring the scales?" he said to Mick without bothering to sit down.

They were by Mick's feet under the table. He was looking at the crowd. "This could get nasty, Billy. They're running a book at the bar, did you know?"

"Bit of fun," Billy shrugged. "So what?"

"It's not too late to call it off," I said.

"Nah!" he said, poker-faced. "It's a laugh, that's all, it's Friday night. Where's Tom, then?"

"He's not here," I said, hoping that he wouldn't show up at all, but the murmur which ran through the pub at that moment told me that he just had. A second later we saw him as the crush of people parted like a wave to let him through. Here he was now, coming down through the narrow pub, wearing shorts and a sandal and a big billowy green T-shirt, his beloved cigar box tucked

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under one arm. On crutches. His right leg, from above the knee down, was cocooned inside a plaster cast.

"What the hell . . . ?" Billy murmured.

Cutter hopped up, coming to a stop in front of us. He looked sick. The skin of his face was grey-white, and pasty like wet dough. His eyes were glazed and ringed with red. It sounded when he spoke as though it was through pain.

"I had an accident."

Up at the bar, someone tittered.

"Bet's off, then," said Mick, quick as a flash.

"Unforeseen circumstances," I nodded. "Wouldn't be right to go through with it now. . . ." But I stopped then, looking at Cutter. With his eyes, he was beseeching me. I frowned. Did he really want the bet to go ahead still?

Billy did, anyway. He was angry.

"No chance, not after all this! The bet's still on!"

"Come on, Billy!" Mick implored. "Look at the state of him! He shouldn't be here at all, he should be at home in bed, or in bloody hospital, more like it!" He turned to Cutter. "What the hell did you do to yourself?"

"I don't know, Mick, I don't know," said Cutter. He seemed close to tears now. "It was an accident."

But Billy was adamant, and with their money riding on it, he had the crowd on his side. They pressed in to see, some standing on tables and chairs at the sides. Mick was shouted down. Out of the quiet that finally settled came Billy's voice.

"What about the plaster cast?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, it must weigh at least a couple of pounds."

Mick nodded. "Those things are heavy."

"Let's call it three," said Billy. "Seventeen stone nine plus three is twelve. So he's got to weigh in at seventeen twelve minus half a stone. . . ."

"Seventeen stone five," I said.

"He's wearing clothes as well. . . .Tell you what, Tom. Why don't you slip off your shirt and that sandal? Got to make it a proper weighing. Under the circumstances, we won't worry about the shorts."

This was it, then, the punch line to Billy's joke.

"All right," said Cutter at last, wearily. The crowd cheered. Some people, at least, were having fun.

"Let's get this over with," said Mick in disgust. He reached under the table for the scale. Looking at Cutter, he said, "Then we can get you home."

I took charge of the cigar box, then helped Cutter to sit down. While I was unstrapping his one sandal I noticed that the plaster cast was already covered in scrawled get-well messages.

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I smiled lamely. "The nurses write them on, did they?"

He looked at me, but he didn't answer. Sweat coursed down his pallid cheeks. He was close to fainting. It was an effort for him to get his shirt off. White fat spilled out over his waistline. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like his gut was at least as big as a week ago. Cutter never had been going to make it. Seeing him now without the shirt, some of the crowd were suddenly embarrassed, and shut up. Others, though, jeered and whistled sarcastically, the louder as Mick and I pulled him to his feet. He sagged in the middle, his head lolling forward a little, as we propped the wooden crutches under his elbows. Billy had the scales. He checked the calibration, then laid them at Cutter's feet with a flourish. Now he stepped back and raised a hand for quiet.

"Okay, Tom," he said quietly, "I'll be having that watch now."

"Okay, Billy," said Cutter. Without ado, he let himself swing forward until his good foot was planted squarely in the middle of the left-hand side of the scales. Wincing, with an awkward shimmy of his right hip he hoisted the plaster cast up onto the platform. Tears of pain ran down his face, but he stood firm, catching his breath. Mick and I came in from the sides.

"All right?" asked Mick.

Cutter nodded stiffly, bracing himself. Gently holding him by the upper arms, we eased the crutches out from under his armpits and handed them on. Though we kept our grip on him—light enough so the result could not be held in doubt—I felt sure he was going to topple. He didn't. He used all his energy to keep himself upright, and such was the intensity of his effort and the determination on his face that for a long moment we were all caught up and forgot to look at the scales.

Billy was the first to.

"I don't believe it," he said, his eyes fixed on the little glass window. Then, Mick and I saw. Cutter would have, too, except he was staring straight ahead in stark concentration.

The needle had come to rest at seventeen stone three pounds. Cutter had won the bet.

"It's Cutter!" I cried. "By two whole pounds!"

Amidst the bewildered tumult that rose all around, Billy, in shock, wheeled like a drunk into the crowd, knocking over a table, taking a couple of onlookers with him as he fell. Cutter was trembling wildly, but Mick had the presence of mind to dash for a chair. As Tom crumpled backwards there was a firm surface ready to meet him, and it held, thank God. All seventeen stone three of him.

Seventeen stone three. It was impossible. I thrust his cigar box back into his hands and slapped him on the back. Exhausted but happy, he grinned up at me. The crowd was gathering in, their mockery turned to congratulations now that he was proclaimed

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the victor. A beer was thrust before him, and Cutter drank it down and called for another like a king.

Without ceremony, Mick took the keys and the gold fob watch from his pocket. As he pressed them into Cutter's lap he seemed glad to be rid of them.

"These are yours, I believe. I'll find out where Billy keeps the Cadillac. You can pick it up whenever you want."

"Thanks, Mick," said Cutter with a grateful smile. He quickly slipped the watch and the keys into his cigar box, then hugged it to his chest.

Billy had not moved from the floor. He sat cross-legged, his head bowed, poking at his boots with a finger, a little boy who has lost his favourite toy in a playground game. Mick bent over him, speaking softly, telling him how it had been a laugh, that was all, on a Friday night up at The Carpenters Arms.

Cutter left his shirt draped over his shoulders, but I helped him slip his sandal back on. Kneeling there, for the first time I took a good look at the plaster cast on his right leg. As I said, it was covered in the scrawls of well-wishers, but now I noticed something else: The plaster was grubby, not clean and white. I saw, too, that most of the messages were smudged and faded, and that there were splits running the length of the cast, from knee to toe. The whole thing was actually made up of two separate segments which had been very sloppily and haphazardly glued together. The bandages around Cutter's knee and lower thigh were fresh—yet they too seemed to have been smothered with adhesive. It didn't make sense. What was he doing wearing an old cast? Was the health system so ruinated these days that they were recycling plaster?

Cutter saw where my attention was directed.

"It's all right," he whispered to me, guiltily. "It's an automatic, you see? An automatic."

I saw the red then, seeping out through the bottom of the cast, forming a growing puddle on the floor.

"Where'd you get this cast, Cutter?" I asked, standing up.

"It's the old one," he said, licking his lips and chortling at his own cleverness. "From when I broke my leg. Years ago, remember?"

Now I did remember. Come to think of it, I'd probably signed the thing myself.

Jesus, I thought, as I ran for the phone to call the ambulance. *How the hell is he going to get his driving license?*

Later, when Cutter and Billy were gone and it had all quietened down, I bought Mick and myself a stiff drink with some of the five hundred pounds non-repayable credit they had very graciously extended me at the bar. ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

NEXT TIME WILL BE DIFFERENT

by Pam Barnsley

Manny didn't even want to get into the car. He stood with one hand on the door handle and the other gripping his worn pack while anger soured his guts. This was not part of the plan.

"Hey, Manny, it's cool. Really. He's a good guy." Bud's eyes were as shiny as a bucket of eels.

"That wasn't the deal, and you know it." Manny shook his head in disgust and opened the car door. He had no choice now.

Canadian Pam Barnsley makes her home in British Columbia. She is the author of numerous newspaper and magazine articles and of a hiking trails handbook. She also has two fiction credits: the two television scripts she wrote for the CBC. Her *EQMM* debut is her first work of fiction to see print. She has recently completed a mystery novel. ¶

More than half the backseat was taken up with a jumble of duffel bags. Manny pulled his head back out.

"I'll put my bag in the trunk," he said, and started walking towards the rear of the car.

"Can't," Bud said, "lock's jammed." He shrugged his skinny shoulders in apology. "Piece of crap."

Manny climbed into the backseat, wedged his bag on top of the others, and turned to look at the stranger in the front passenger seat. The stranger had the kind of all-over freckles that make a man look boyish, but his too-pale eyes and the casual way he sprawled, one arm over the seat back and the other on the window sill, said that he was the kind who would just as soon take the hard way as the easy.

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"Manny, this is Rick," Bud said, and the two men nodded at each other but didn't shake hands. "Rick's just catching a lift for a ways."

"How far's that?" Manny asked, polite enough.

"Don't know yet. We'll see." Rick smiled as easy as if he owned the car and the whole goddamned trip.

"Where you coming from?"

"Out West, here and there." He turned his head away deliberately and stared out the side window. "Wherever my luck holds," he added softly, as if to himself.

Manny wanted more answers, but one thing you learned inside was not to ask too many questions. He decided he could wait a little to sort this out.

Bud drove through the downtown core and Manny drank it in, his heart shoveling blood faster than a chain gang. This is the real thing, Manny thought. Everything was the same but different. The clothes, the way people moved down the street with such confidence. Unwary. Sure he'd seen it on television the last twelve years, but that was just pictures; when you were inside you never knew for sure what was real on the outside. The news, the sports games, the ads—it all looked like movies after a while.

Bud got out six months earlier than Manny, and now here they were following the plan Manny had made inside.

The first time Manny had only gone down for eighteen months and the second time a nickel. This last stretch had changed him. Twelve years, and he wasn't going back. Ever.

Sure, all the cons said that, and they meant it in their own sorry optimism. Manny wasn't the only one to sit at the counseling groups with tears in his eyes and choke out the forgotten sadnesses of his youth. The others would be back inside within six months; it was written all over them, plain as the rough D-E-A-T-H or P-E-A-C-E tattooed on their knuckles.

But Manny knew he was different.

Manny's cousin had a machine shop up in Idaho. About as far away across the country as you could get without running through to Alaska. Manny had a postcard from Stu showing a lake surrounded by dark green hills, and in the distance mountains with perfect white peaks. It was a place so different you could be somebody different there, too.

Manny had worked the machine shop inside for the past eight years and he was good. Stu wouldn't regret spotting him the job.

"Next time will be different," Manny had said to Bud. "I'm going straight, whatever it takes."

And Bud had said he was going straight, too. Stay away from the old hangouts, the booze, the deals and setups.

Now they were heading to Idaho. For years Manny had dreamed

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of this, the highway and towns and life inside disappearing behind them, snuffed as completely as their cigarette smoke pulled out the car windows. He'd planned every detail, how hard he would work, the good meals he'd have—with even a steak sometimes—sleeping in the cool quiet with a window wide open. It was never quiet inside. Thinking of the quiet made Manny's chest tight with the sweetness of it.

But all the times Manny and Bud had talked, they'd never talked about anyone else coming along.

At the first gas stop Manny got Bud by himself.

"Who is this guy and why the hell do we have to take him anywhere? He's a jerk, he's gonna be trouble—"

"There's not gonna be any trouble, I swear. In fact, you'll see, you'll be glad when we get outta state."

"I do not want that guy riding with us all the way out of the state. I want you to cut him loose now. I mean now."

"I can't do that, Manny." Bud shook his head, sad but like it was a fact he couldn't change.

"Goddammit, Bud, what have you got yourself into?"

Rick came back to the car with a couple of cold six-packs of beer. He peeled a can out and lobbed it to Bud, who took it with a flick of his eyes at Manny in the rearview mirror.

"Relax, Manny, you're out, you're a free bird—celebrate!" Bud said. But Manny didn't want any beer.

He looked at Bud in his stupid tight shirt and shiny pants, skinny as a con's promise. Bud looked like a desperate salesman, which is what he'd always been, one way or another.

The radio played Credence Clearwater as they slipped through the grey high-rises, Three Dog Night brought them out to the strip malls, and Shania Twain cooed them into the suburbs. Bud and Rick had killed the first six-pack and the empties clacked and quareled under the front seats when Bud pulled the sedan through a corner. Manny closed his eyes and tried to relax, to appreciate being here, now. He listened to the concerned but enthusiastic voice of the newscaster summing up the world conflagrations, distant strangers fighting incomprehensible wars. Closer to home, three were believed drowned in a flash flood upstate, a currency-exchange employee had been kidnapped along with a large sum of cash, and medical experts warned that stress was the number-one killer.

"It's violent times we live in," Rick said, though he didn't sound unhappy about it. Manny opened his eyes and was glad to see Bud finally give Rick a disapproving look.

The Panthers savaged the Dolphins and the weatherman promised they wouldn't need their golf umbrellas, but Manny was looking forward to the cool of Idaho. It could rain on him and he

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wouldn't mind. In the winter it would even snow, erasing everything, and no one would know who he had been before.

Manny shifted in the backseat and tried to stretch his legs out, but the duffels gave him no room. The sedan's shocks were shot, and Manny's lower back ached.

"Next stop I'd like to switch up front," he said.

Rick didn't respond, and Bud took his eyes off the road to look at him. "Rick?" Something in Bud's voice bothered Manny. Who was Rick that Bud had to ask, like begging a favor, in his own car?

Rick turned enough to show Manny one shark-pale eye. "No problem, my friend," he said.

Manny did not want Rick calling him friend.

The car pushed through the miles of warm night and, in the front seat now, Manny stretched his legs out and watched the lights. White headlights bloomed, houses and buildings glowed softer white and amber, occasionally, closer, the blue of a television screen, the rainbow of neon signs. A blue-flashing cruiser raced through the tide bleeding out of the city.

Familiar as breathing, the songs on the radio echoed the rhythm of the road and the car. The newscaster read new descriptions of old disasters: The bodies of the three drowned had been recovered, police now believed the missing currency-exchange employee had met with foul play, canned peaches had been linked to cancer. The weather still promised fair for tomorrow.

Under his seat the empties rolled together again, a hollow clacking as they bullied each other and a duller noise as they ran up against something heavier. Manny reached underneath to pull the offenders out. He'd put them all in a bag and drop them at the next stop.

His hand knew it and closed around it familiar as a handshake the split second before his brain caught up. He pulled the gun out and tilted his hand so the weight of the weapon lay in his palm.

"What the hell is this here for?!"

"Sorry, sorry. It's okay," Bud said. "It's Rick's."

"It's not okay! We get pulled over with this here, I'm back inside!"

"It's okay. Be cool, Manny. Please."

Rick said, "I'll take care of it in a bit. Just put it back for now."

"No. I want this out of here now. Next garbage bin, next river. You pull over, Bud, I'm telling you."

Rick was leaning forward now, his eyes as cold as Idaho. "I'm telling you, my friend, put it back."

Manny had to twist in his seat to keep Rick in sight. He didn't want to be in the front seat anymore, he didn't want Rick at his back. "Don't call me friend."

Manny and Rick stared at each other. Inside, Manny had hated that stare: dragging up all your hate and guts and craziness into

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your eyes and laying it out like a poker hand.

Bud said, "I'll pull over when I get a chance, Manny. We'll sort it out. Come on, guys."

Manny let his disdain for the man in the backseat lift a corner of his lip, then he turned away from him. He put the gun in his pocket and held it there in his hand.

Bud pulled the car into the busy truck stop and he and Rick got out. Rick grabbed two of the duffels and headed through the swing door of the restaurant. After a second's hesitation Bud reached into the backseat, grabbed another couple of duffel bags, and followed him. Manny sat in the car and thought about what he would do.

The diner's tall neon sign cast its light over the parking lot, washing the faces of a woman and a small boy with a sickly orange glow. As they walked directly underneath the sign, its shadows hollowed their eye sockets like those of skeletons. Cars and trucks were arriving and leaving in a steady stream, and their dust smothered the weeds struggling along the edges of the lot.

Manny decided he would get the trunk open somehow and shift all the luggage into it. When Bud and Rick came back, they could put their duffels in there, too. Then Manny could ride in the backseat and keep an eye on Rick until they could leave him and his gun at the next town.

Manny picked up the keys from where Bud had left them in the center console, grabbed the last duffel, and headed for the rear of the car.

The police cruiser pulled up as Manny reached the trunk. From the corners of his eyes Manny saw the officers watching him. He slipped the key into the trunk, the latch clicked effortlessly, and the trunk yawned upwards on its springs. For a guy who had a sheet listing a dozen break and enters, Bud must not have made much effort with the trunk. Manny felt relief that he did not have to fight with the lock—at least the cops wouldn't think he was breaking into someone else's car.

The police were walking towards Manny now, and he was aware of the gun sagging his pocket, aware of the officers still moving casually, but their holsters unsnapped.

He swung the duffel forward but stopped it against the lid and held it there. Inside the trunk Manny saw the green currency-exchange uniform, the grey, spattered face, the entry wound so close to the ear that part of the lobe was gone.

He saw the cops moving closer, he saw his life inside, his own prints on the gun, Rick and Bud gone with two duffels each—they'd been gone a long time. Manny saw everything moving closer, except Idaho. As he turned towards the two cops, his hand slipped into his pocket and embraced the heaviness there. ●

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Art by Brian Rumbolo

THE SECOND COMING

by Terence Faherty

1.

I was sitting in the main concourse of Union Station when I spotted her. I was supposed to be meeting a train, but it was running late, as trains tended to do in 1964, so I'd granted myself ten minutes to smoke a pipe in the station's cool and cavernous waiting room. It was one of my favorite places in Los Angeles because it reminded me of the identically named station in my hometown of Indianapolis. Not that the architecture was the same. The L.A. station's was Spanish mission meets the Hollywood Bowl, while Indy's was strictly Victorian robber-baron chic. It was the scale of the space that jogged the memories. And the variety of people inside that space. No place in the world for watching people like a train station. Which brings me back to her.

She was my age—the flip side of forty-five—but better preserved. Very well preserved, everywhere but her face, which was worn in a way I found all too familiar. Being an old married guy, I would have noted the Marie Wilson figure and the shoulder-length auburn hair and moved on to the next subject, if it hadn't been for

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the way this subject was dressed. She wore a tight pink cashmere sweater above a gray A-line skirt too long and too wide at the hem for the space age. Even more dated was her footwear: saddle shoes and socks that stopped just north of her slender ankles. Bobbysocks, in other words, those symbols of a whole generation of young women, the bobbysoxers, the makers of Frank Sinatra's career, the breakers of innumerable G.I. hearts, the dusters of soda fountain stools from Bakersfield to Bangor.

That generation had long since gone the way of Sinatra's curls, gone into motherhood, most of them, producing a whole new crop of handfuls. But here was one of the original specimens in front of me. Briefly in front of me, as she was nervously moving up and down the concourse, never lighting anywhere for long, her gaze returning again and again to the station clock, which was moving way too slowly to rate that much attention.

Terence Faherty was first brought to the attention of *EQMM* by another *EQMM* writer, Michael Z. Lewin. In the years since his 1998 debut with us he's developed, at novel length, two very successful series, one of which features Scott Elliott, the World War Two vet who appears as shamus in this story of 1960s Hollywood. A collection of Faherty stories, *The Confessions of Owen Keane,* will soon be available from Crippen & Landru. ✝

I tapped out my pipe, got to my feet, and wandered her way. She'd paused by a magazine stand, though she already carried an example in one pale hand. Like her outfit, her magazine was out-of-date. I recognized the red masthead and the black-and-white photography of *Life*'s 1940s design. When I drew closer, I made out the subject of the cover story, actress Geraldine Fitzgerald, and the date of the issue, August 7, 1944, and the hairs on the back of my neck did a little samba.

Then she looked up, and our eyes met. Hers were a watery brown. And frightened, but she might have been passing the same judgment on my steely blue ones just then. Before I could tip my hat and offer my name, Scott Elliott, she turned and hurried off toward the end of the grand hall that led down to the platforms.

I watched her until she'd disappeared down the stairs. Then I caught another pair of eyes, also brown, not frightened. They belonged to a porter who was leaning against the green and gold tile wainscoting of the wall to my left. He didn't look away, so I crossed to him, resisting the urge to shake my head with every step.

"Morning," I said.

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"Morning," he said back.

"Notice the brunette in the pink sweater?"

"Been noticing her. She's been flitting around here better part of an hour."

"Seen her before?"

"Maybe I've seen her before. Twenty years ago. We had all kinds of little girlies like that around here then. Meeting their soldier boys or telling them goodbye. Never liked the goodbyes much."

"I meant, have you seen her around here recently?"

"Does she stop by regular? Nope. Couldn't call once every twenty years regular."

2.

I stood there wondering for a time after the porter had moved off in search of a lonesome bag. His memories of wartime goodbyes and reunions had put flesh on the idea I'd gotten when I'd spotted the bobbysoxer's magazine. It was that this sad-eyed woman was reenacting a day from twenty years ago. The day she'd said goodbye to her sweetheart, maybe. Or the day his train showed up without him. That one jibed better with the look she'd been giving the station clock, the look of someone meeting a train she'd been waiting for forever.

What my little fantasy wouldn't jibe with was my own experience of the service. No soldier going overseas knew for certain he'd be back at all, never mind the day and hour. The only ones who could even hazard a guess were the survivors who'd made it stateside and been handed their discharges at some middle-of-nowhere processing center. Of course, something could have happened to her soldier between the time he'd called or wired her from Seattle or Albuquerque and the scheduled arrival of his train. The shock of that irony—a man survives the fighting and dies or disappears within hours of home—might still be echoing twenty years later.

I looked at the big wall clock that had so fascinated the woman in question and found that it was time to meet my own overdue train. Not that I found my current assignment half as interesting as a certain overage sweater girl. But she'd headed down to the tracks herself, so for once my duty and my curiosity were tugging on the same end of the rope.

Unfortunately, duty, in the form of a studio executive named Larry Nesbitt, found me first. Nesbitt was a benchwarmer at United Artists, but still young enough to dream of making the starting nine. Hollywood had been lousy with Nesbitts back before the war—toothy, wavy-haired yes-men with very vague job descriptions. Their ranks had been thinned considerably by the ongoing studio shakeout, but I still knew more than my share, working as I did for a private security firm so discreet its opera-

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tives had no job descriptions whatsoever. Nesbitt had been a satisfied customer of Hollywood Security's some months back. Now he'd hired us for what my boss, Paddy Maguire, termed a "standard hand-holding job."

Nesbitt didn't see things quite that way. "Elliott, where the hell did you get off to? The train was due in five minutes ten minutes ago. We're not meeting my Aunt Sophie, you know."

We weren't meeting Lady Bird Johnson, either, but you couldn't tell that from the state of Nesbitt's nerves. As it happened, we weren't meeting anybody. We were there—my client and I and two studio flunkies with a hand truck—to accept delivery of a motion picture, *The Greatest Story Ever Told.* Not the George Stevens wide-screen Technicolor version. That was currently in postproduction, with release scheduled for sometime in '65. We were awaiting the return of the original, the 1919 silent produced and directed by Thomas Ince, probably the most famous of Hollywood's lost films.

It was also one of Hollywood's most famous flops, a life of Christ that had inflamed the Bible Belt and been condemned from pulpits of every denomination. The problem had been timing. In 1919, Cecil B. DeMille had yet to make Sunday-school movie-making respectable. Worse, Ince's Messiah, an actor named Victor Lawrence, had been arrested in Chicago on a morals charge just as the film had hit theaters. According to legend, Lawrence's fall from grace had been the source of the long-standing superstition that it was unlucky to show Christ's face on the screen.

It had certainly been unlucky for Ince and his backers. Those prints that hadn't been destroyed by angry churchgoers had ended up in the studio's own furnace. When museums of modern art had begun collecting silent masterpieces in the forties, no print or negative of *The Greatest Story Ever Told* could be found.

But now, on the eve of the big-budget remake's release, a print had turned up. In atheist Russia, of all places. Nesbitt had heard of it from a friend at the New York museum that had haggled over it with the Soviets. He'd talked his United Artist bosses into underwriting the purchase—to the tune of a hundred grand, more than the film's original budget—in exchange for the right to use the rediscovery to promote the Stevens epic.

Nesbitt had then personally arranged for Hollywood Security to see the film safely from the train station to the studio vault. Silent-movie thieves being a rare breed, I figured I was there as window dressing, an extra in a carefully orchestrated photo opportunity. Only there were no photographers in sight. And no newshounds. I asked Nesbitt where he was hiding them.

"I'm not," he said, looking up the empty tracks for about the fiftieth time. "I didn't call anyone. I'm not calling anyone until the stu-

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dio gates are locked behind us. I'm not kidding, Elliott. I haven't slept the last three nights worrying about today. My neck's sticking out a mile; I can feel it. Those museum people had to jump the gun and issue that press release about how much we'd paid for this thing. That story was picked up by every paper in every tank town this train's been through."

"Why didn't you fly it out?"

"Planes crash."

I was familiar with this argument against air travel, Paddy having used it since Will Rogers's last landing, so I returned to the publicity angle. "I thought free ink was the whole idea."

Nesbitt gave me a look I often got from Hollywood insiders, the look that always made me feel like an outsider. "Without that film, there'll be no free ink."

I tapped my suit coat at the spot that would have been hiding my gun if I'd thought this was the kind of job that required wearing one. "Then we'll just have to see it makes it home."

3.

Not long afterward, a bored voice came over the public address system to announce the arrival of the missing streamliner. Then the anticipatory rumble—the one you first feel through the soles of your shoes—began. It built and built, becoming a sound as sinister and elemental as any Bernard Hermann score. By the time the red and silver diesel had reached the end of the platform, I could barely hear Nesbitt yelling in my ear: "The baggage cars will stop down there."

He trotted off after his two assistants. I would have followed him—not trotting—if I hadn't caught sight of her, the Spirit of 1944.

She'd certainly come out of nowhere like a ghost. I'd scanned the crowd for her without success throughout Nesbitt's lament. But suddenly there she was, moving away from my post at the baggage cars, just as the application of the train's many brakes made calling out to her impossible. A second later, the general confusion on the platform would have made posing a casual question like, "What year do you think it is?" equally difficult, so I reluctantly followed my real client in the opposite direction.

I found Nesbitt throwing what weight he had around. He'd already arranged to accept delivery right there on the platform, instead of the more civilized setting of the baggage office. Now he was insisting that the film canisters be unloaded before anything else. If by some chance they'd actually made it to California safely, he wasn't going to risk their being smuggled off the train in some innocent-looking crate or trunk.

The freight agent was an ex-N.C.O. with the air of a man who

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had heard everything twice and hadn't been impressed the first time. Nevertheless, he humored Nesbitt, disappearing into the baggage car, chewing a pencil as he went.

I used this intermission to check the passenger end of the platform. The bobbysoxer was there, standing out now that the train's modest human-being load was scattering. She was doing little dancer's darts toward the few unescorted men still exiting the train: two steps toward each figure and a quick one back. Despite the distance between us, I could see she was panicking, that those brown eyes of hers were as wide as a doll's.

I took a step or two of my own down the hot concrete. Then Nesbitt called, "Hey, Elliott! Get back here!"

The agent had placed two octagonal cases near the sliding door of the car. He was holding some paperwork under Nesbitt's nose, distracting him with it. My calculation of the likely length of that distraction was interrupted by a scream.

I caught a glimpse of the time traveler as she ran into the station proper. By that time I was running myself. Nesbitt was yelling again, but I was more conscious of the startled people I was dodging than his angry words. I caught a glimpse of the old copy of *Life,* crumpled on the ground. It helped me select the right doorway from the series of identical doorways leading off the platform. Beyond the tiled opening were stairs, which I took two at a time. I paused on a landing where all the parallel staircases from the track level merged into two big ones that led up into the concourse. There was no sign of her, but I kept climbing.

At the top of the stairs, I ran into my friend the nostalgic porter, almost knocking both of us down.

"Who you chasing?" he asked as we steadied one another.

"The woman in the pink sweater."

He shook his head. "No, sir. She hasn't come up here. I'd have noticed her, bag or no bag."

She might have doubled back to the platform on one of the other stairways. Or she might have taken a tunnel to one of the other platforms. Neither move made much sense, so I decided to go back the way I'd come. Nesbitt would be down there, awaiting my explanation.

Or so I thought. There was no sign of him or his helpers on the blazing platform. No sign of the N.C.O. freight agent, either, though his troops were busy unloading the baggage cars. I was about to ask one of them where everyone had gotten off to, when I heard my name. One of Nesbitt's two sidekicks came out of an arched tunnel, waving to me and yelling for help.

I followed him into the passage, a smooth-floored ramp used to roll baggage carts up into the station. Ten steps inside, Nesbitt was seated on the floor, holding a bloody handkerchief to his head.

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The second flunky was there, too, standing next to his empty hand truck.

"They went up," Nesbitt said. "Two of them, with guns. Hurry!"

I sprinted up the passage, alone, without a gun. I stayed alone until I hit daylight again on the loading dock apron. Then I had the indifferent traffic on Alameda Street for company.

4.

"I'm *not* blaming you, Scotty," Nesbitt said. He'd said it so often over the past few hours that the words had twisted themselves inside out, becoming an accusation instead of an absolution. Or so it seemed to my guilty ear.

We were seated in the office of Paddy Maguire, titular head of Hollywood Security. I use the titular wiggle advisedly. Paddy, a sixty-plus guy who could pass for Pat O'Brien's meatier brother, had developed a profound disinterest in things, including the business he'd founded almost twenty-five years earlier. The malaise had come on him late the previous fall, after his anger over John Kennedy's murder had boiled itself away. But he was listening to Nesbitt politely enough.

The studio exec was also polite, though his anger had yet to boil off. He'd changed from his train-meeting suit to sports clothes, and a small white bandage nestled in his wavy hair. "I might have tried to help this woman myself, if I'd noticed her," he was saying. "Though it's obvious now that she was only there to distract you. Obvious to me."

Paddy left off lighting a corona long enough to say, "To us, too."

"So I'm not interested in damaging the reputation of your firm. Even if I were free to speak frankly to the newspapers."

"Which you're not," Paddy said between attempts to blow out his match.

"Which I'm not. In fact, I'd like to give you a chance for a comeback. I'd like Scotty to be the one who delivers the ransom money." He touched his bandage lightly. "I've had my fill of dealing with those two gentlemen."

I didn't think much of the idea, beyond wondering if this new scheme explained Nesbitt's sudden affection for my first name. Paddy said, "You're sure there's going to be a ransom?"

"The film's worthless to anyone but us and a museum. And no museum will touch it now. And remember, the guy who did the talking said, 'You'll hear from us tomorrow.' "

"And, 'No cops,' " Paddy added with a shadow of his old smile, the sentiment being dear to his heart. "That's all he said?"

"That's all."

"And the studio will pay?"

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"They'll have to. The newspapers may not have the whole story, but they have enough."

I'd done my best to smuggle Nesbitt and his bloody head out of the station, but there'd been too many witnesses, though none of them had seen anything useful, like the make and license number of the getaway car.

"I wouldn't worry about much play from the papers," Paddy said. "They've got to figure it's all a publicity stunt."

Nesbitt was still in a forgiving mood. "I don't blame them for that," he said as he stood. "In fact, the whole farce will be great for publicity, if we get the film back. I'm counting on you two for that. I'll call you the minute I hear something."

Paddy walked Nesbitt out, perhaps to distract him from the threadbare stretches of the entryway carpet. I sat where I was, filling my pipe. When that project was over and my boss still hadn't returned, I got up and went in search of him.

I found Paddy on our front walk, presumably in the very spot where he'd said his goodbyes to Nesbitt. He was rocking on his heels and looking up at a passing cloud.

I bummed a match from him and said, "So we're certain that woman was in on the heist?"

"You're not? A little hot for pink sweaters in August, wouldn't you say?"

"She was wearing the clothes she'd worn twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago in August, according to that billboard-size clue, the magazine she flashed at you. I don't remember the Augusts back then being any cooler. But that sweater of hers was just the kind of detail you'd think of if you were dreaming up a bobbysoxer costume. Especially if you were trying to catch a man's eye. And here's another little thing. You guessed she was your age."

"So?"

"So you were a trifle old for a corporal twenty years ago, so she would have been very old for a bobby-soxer. No woman of twenty-five would have dressed that way in 'forty-four. Dressing like your kid sister is a more recent fashion trend."

He sounded so much like the Paddy of old that I barely minded the points he was scoring at my expense. "Sorry I didn't spot her as a ringer."

"You can't be blamed for a suit fitting you when it's made to measure. And she was certainly custom-made for you, an ex-G.I. given to dwelling on the past when he's not actually dwelling in it. Who knows you that well, I wonder?"

"Half the lowlifes in this town, given my post-army career."

"At least half," Paddy agreed. "I still smell a publicity stunt. How sure are you that it was really Nesbitt's own blood he was waving

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around on that handkerchief?"

"I watched them sew up his scalp."

"No playacting then. Ah, well. I guess we'll just have to wait to see what tomorrow brings."

5.

I decided I couldn't sit around waiting for tomorrow to ambush me. So after I left Paddy I drove over to Vine Street just north of Melrose. Commercial properties were crowding out the little bungalows that once had prospered in that neighborhood. Those residences that were left had commercial sidelines, often as not. The one I parked my Thunderbird next to was a combination private home and casting agency, the Hanks Agency. It was run by a former screenwriter named Florence Hanks, whom I'd met in 1947 when she'd been scribbling away for Warner Bros.

I was figuring it like this: If my damsel in distress really was a fake, she was probably an actress. Her performance on the platform had suggested some aptitude in that department. I was further figuring her to be a down-on-her-luck actress for the following reasons: One, the deal she'd gotten involved in was shady. Two, I hadn't recognized her and I would have if she'd had even half a career. And three, failed actresses were commoner than palm trees around Hollywood.

And there was one reason more. I had some experience of the acting profession, having spent some time in it myself before the war. That was the past Paddy and others accused me of dwelling in, not my army days. So I knew what the acting dream was like, and I knew what waking from that dream was like. And I was wondering if the familiar wear and tear I'd seen on the face of my mystery woman might not be the telltale leavings of a dream that had flickered out.

All of which led me to the Hanks Agency. It was the kind of institution a desperate actress would pass through, sooner or later. And Florence had a memory for the transient faces of extras and also-rans that was second to none.

She kept her beer cold, too. She opened us a couple and lit herself a cigarette as we settled down in her living room with her books of mug shots. That's what she called them. Actually, they were albums of publicity stills. Enough photos of eager young hope to break a heart, if we'd had one between us.

"The way you describe her," Florence said, "I'm thinking it was someone dewy-eyed in the forties, grimly determined in the fifties, and now just grim." She held her cigarette in the backhanded way Bette Davis had taught women to hold them, though it might have been the way Florence had taught Davis. "These are women I had on file in the fifties, so they're our best bet."

She looked pretty much the way she had when I'd first met her.

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She'd hennaed her hair back then and worn enough face powder to make her teeth look ochre, and she still did. Timeless elegance, she might have called it.

"Have you considered hookers?" she asked.

"Not recently."

"I mean, have you considered the idea that this decoy dame might be a hooker? That'd be a good title, by the way: 'The Decoy Dame.' Very Erle Stanley Gardner. I'm writing again, did I tell you? Mystery stories. *Ellery Queen's Magazine.*"

"Remind me to subscribe."

"She'd be old for a hooker, though. Old for a stripper, too. Most dreamers her age have given up and headed home. That's what I really should have gone into after Warner's. And don't ask if I mean stripping."

The thought hadn't entered my mind, but I smiled politely.

"What I'm saying is, instead of trying to place young hopefuls in the movies, I should have started a relocation service for the ones who'd given up. Gotten them jobs in Boise or Muncie or . . ."

"Poughkeepsie?" I suggested.

"Perfect," she said, clinking her beer glass against my bottle. "Probably would have made a decent living at that. Not to mention all the good I could have done, all the wasted lives I could have rehabilitated."

I might have taken offense at that, as a potential customer of Hanks's hypothetical rescue service, if I hadn't turned a page just then and found my ghost. The face was less lined—unlined, in fact—and she was smiling an open, trusting smile that seemed as out of place, given my experience of her, as a goatee. The big brown eyes—not frightened then—had been her best feature. They were heavily lashed, and the photographer had managed to suggest unfathomable depths. That detail fit.

"Got her?" Florence asked. "What do you know? Slip her out of there. Her name and address should be on the back."

They were. The name was Joy Keedy. The address was an apartment not far away on Mariposa.

"That address was current in nineteen fifty-two," Florence said, squinting at her notations on the photo's back. "So I wouldn't count on it. But at least you have a name." She repeated that name a time or two. "I'm sure I remember her. She did some photo layouts, some television. Maybe a movie, even. Last I heard, she was marrying some gaffer at RKO. It should have been a happily-ever-after. I wonder what happened."

"I'll let you know," I said, handing her my empty.

"Do that, Scotty. I may need it for 'The Decoy Dame.' They pay by the word, you know."

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6.

Florence was right about the Mariposa address being stale. No one there remembered a Joy Keedy. She might have left a forwarding address, but the place had changed hands since '52, and none of the records had survived the putsch. I couldn't go by RKO to ask around for a gaffer who may or may not have married a buxom brunette, since that studio was only a happy memory. So I went home.

There my loving wife and my two loving children listened to the story of my day while trying to suppress their loving smiles. Later the kids went off to see the latest Beach Party movie. Ella and I opted for an evening of dancing, our private code word for sex. Ella asked me if I wanted her to model a tight pink sweater as a warm-up, but we did fine without it.

The call from Nesbitt came in early the next morning. He'd received the filmnappers' demands: ten thousand dollars, delivery details to be phoned in after five.

"They're not greedy," Paddy observed after hanging up. "Whatever else you can say about their manners."

I spent the day trying to get a line on Joy Keedy, without success. She wasn't paying dues to any of the unions or guilds in town. She didn't have a telephone or a police record or even a library card. If she was driving a car, she was doing it under another name.

Ella tied up our line around four just long enough to tell me to be careful and to stress that it was just her standard concern, that she hadn't felt any special tingles or received any omens. The phone didn't ring again until after seven. It was Nesbitt, too keyed-up to say any more than he'd be right over.

He arrived carrying a little leather satchel that might as well have had "ransom money" printed on each side. "The place they picked is Fanita Canyon. It's a little cul-de-sac about a mile south of where Topanga Canyon Boulevard crosses Mulholland Drive."

That area was a ways out and lonely. "The far side of the moon wasn't available?" I asked.

Nesbitt ignored the crack. "At the top of the street there's a house for sale. It's empty, only tonight at nine there'll be a man there with the film. His partner will be watching for cops from somewhere nearby, so there can't be any cops. You give the guy in the house the money and he gives you the film. Two cases, six reels in each case. I've spoken to my friend at the museum in New York. He said each can has a paper label with the name of the original production company, Excelsior, typed on it. We need all twelve, remember."

"One for each finger and ear," I said.

Paddy had been busy checking the money over. "All in order," he said. "Pour yourself a drink, Mr. Nesbitt. I'll just see Scotty to his car."

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Paddy carried the satchel, swinging it like a lunch pail. When I paused at the Thunderbird's door, he reached out and tapped the front of my coat at the very same spot I'd tapped when I'd reassured Nesbitt back at Union Station. Tonight there really was a gun under the gabardine.

"Good," Paddy said. "Never liked a money drop on a dead-end street. Keep your wits about you."

7.

Calling Fanita Canyon a street was giving it all the breaks. It was actually a dirt track scarring a denser corner of the wooded hills just north of the point where Topanga Canyon Boulevard tops the Santa Monica Mountains and begins its plunge into the San Fernando Valley. I took my time climbing Fanita itself, keeping the Ford in low gear and scanning the woods for the lights of neighboring homes. I didn't see so much as the blue-gray glow of a television.

Then my headlights picked up a For Sale sign rising out of the weedy verge at a cockeyed angle. I parked the Thunderbird, shut it down, and waited for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. My dome light didn't undo this precaution when I finally got around to opening my door, as I'd removed its bulb some years before at Paddy's insistence.

The night was clear but moonless. I could just make out the outline of a flat-roofed ranch thirty yards from the road atop a stony outcrop well clear of the trees. There was a light in one front window, a weak yellow light. A lantern, maybe, which would make sense if the electricity was shut off. Nearer to hand was a path bordered by boulders that might have been displaced when they leveled the lot for the house.

I put the doctor's bag in my left hand, unbuttoned my suit coat, and started up. It occurred to me, belatedly, that I'd have both hands full on the trip back and no way to use my gun. I told myself I wouldn't need one by then, probably didn't need one at all. Then the first shot rang out.

That's telling it wrong. I saw the muzzle flash before I heard the shot. It lit the part of the house I'd been studying, the part farthest from the yellow window. I saw a man framed in an open doorway. Then I was lying facedown in the dirt, trying to flatten myself and draw my gun at the same time.

Even with all that going on, I had time to wonder who the hell the man was shooting at. Had Nesbitt called in a police backup he hadn't mentioned to Paddy and me? The second shot settled the issue. I didn't see this one, but I heard it clearly, heard it leave the barrel, heard it ricochet against a boulder to my left and then chip one to my right. I was the target.

It made no sense for him to be shooting at his paymaster, but

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there it was. I crawled to the downrange side of one of the larger rocks and prepared to do some nonsensical shooting of my own.

I never got the chance. I heard the sound of furniture falling over with an accompanying crash of breaking glass. The yellow window went black for half a second. When the flickering light came back, it did it in a big way.

The house had to be built of kindling, the fire took over so fast. I crouched there waiting for the shooter to come out, but he never did. By the time I decided to go in after him, it was too late. Flames blocked every opening. Whoever or whatever was in there was in for keeps.

8.

The little house went out almost as quickly as it had gone up. The fire department had a hand in that—I'd heard their sirens before I'd given up the idea of getting inside—but mostly it was fuel exhaustion. Still, the firemen kept the blaze from spreading to the surrounding forest, so they more than earned their pay.

The speed of their arrival was explained to me by a fireman named Barney. "There's a fire tower just up the ridge. They probably could smell this thing, it was so close. Our station's down at the Mulholland intersection. That's why it didn't take us any time to get here."

He was a young man, by my standards, but he sported an old man's soup-strainer moustache. "Not that we could have done much good if we'd been next-door when it started," he continued, "not as fast as that fire spread. There must have been some kind of accelerant, something like gasoline tossed around to jump-start things. The kerosene from one little lamp couldn't get the whole house going that fast. You say there might have been someone inside?"

"Might have been. Might have been some reels of movie film, too. Could they have come through okay?"

"How old a movie?" Barney asked, very interested.

"Old. Nineteen nineteen."

"How many reels?"

"A dozen."

The fireman whistled. "There's your accelerant right there. They used nitrate stock back then. Very unstable stuff. Burns like old Chicago."

Hope died hard for me. "They were in metal cans."

"Those just act like the casing on a grenade. Sorry, Mr. Elliott. That movie's gone. Was it valuable?"

The price ranged from ten thousand to the stars, depending on your point of view. But I didn't discuss that issue with Barney. It came up later, when I was chatting with a police lieutenant named Grove. It was nearly dawn by then, and one well-protected fire-

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man had begun poking around in the still-warm ashes of the house while the rest of us looked on. There'd been a police presence almost from the start in the form of a single cruiser. I'd used its radio to send a brief account of the evening to Paddy and Ella via a friendly dispatcher.

That same radio call had brought Grove my way. He was too important a man to bother with a little house fire, but he'd taken an interest in Hollywood Security years before. Specifically, he'd expressed a desire to be on hand when Paddy and I finally got what was coming to us, or words to that effect. He saw promise in the current situation.

"Let me get this straight," the lieutenant said. He was an oily guy physically. Personality wise, he was totally without lubrication. "You're hired to get a hundred grand worth of film back, film that was previously snatched from under your nose. Instead, you panic and shoot the guy who did the snatching. He knocks over a lamp and burns down a house, movie and all. Sounds like one of your more efficient operations."

"I never fired a shot," I said.

"The neighbors say it sounded like a battle up here."

"What neighbors? The coyotes?" I unholstered my forty-five and handed it to him.

He examined it briefly and handed it back. "Fellow named Seitz phoned it in. You passed his driveway a hundred yards down the hill."

Barney joined us then. "No sign of a body," he said to Grove.

As disappointing as that was to the policeman, he let it pass without comment. He was distracted, as I was, by two blackened objects Barney carried in gloved hands. One of them was a film reel coated in something that looked like gritty tar. The other was half of a film canister. There was no sign of a paper label on it, or even the residue from one.

"Sorry, Mr. Elliott," Barney said for the second time that morning.

Grove was grinning. "Tell me you guys will have to cover the whole hundred thousand. That should swallow up everything but the gold fillings in your crooked boss's crooked teeth."

"Those too," I said, but I said it to myself.

9.

Grove left shortly after that, to catch some sleep he predicted would be the best he'd had in years. He wished the same for me, but not sincerely.

I gave him a healthy head start. Then I untangled my Ford from the fire trucks and started down the hill. Right away I spotted what I hadn't been able to spot the previous evening: a neighbor's house. I even spotted the neighbor, an older gentleman in pajama

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bottoms and a sweatshirt, rubbernecking at the head of his drive. Seitz, I thought, the guy who phoned the cops.

The idea of a phone that close reminded me that I owed Paddy a follow-up. Next thing I knew, I was stopping and leaning out my window. "Any chance I could use your phone?" I called to Seitz.

"Do you know what went on up there last night?" he called back.

"About half of it."

Half was enough for Seitz. He waved me into the drive and then led me down it, walking tender-footed in his carpet slippers. He wanted his story first, but I told him he was welcome to eavesdrop and I'd fill in the gaps later.

Paddy was still at his desk. I repeated the little I'd passed to him via the police department—the exchange hadn't happened, a fire had, and I was okay—and then explained it in some detail. I ended with Lieutenant Grove's fond hope that Hollywood Security would be picking up the tab.

"The devil we will," Paddy said. "We're a security firm, not Lloyds of London. It may come to the same thing in the end, though. Nesbitt was mad as hell over the possibility that something had happened to the film. He'll be worse when he hears it's a certainty. He was threatening a press conference for later today. To blame us for everything that's happened, I gather. I'd rather lose the cash than what's left of our reputation. To think it could end over this after all we've been through. A hand-holding job."

After a little sighing time, he added, "I'll let Ella know you're on your way," and hung up.

Though puffy-eyed from no sleep and doughy in general, Seitz was a quick study. "You were ransoming a movie? No kidding? Why would anyone pick poor Hector's house for that?"

It was a legitimate question. "Because it was empty, probably. And lonely. How long's it been for sale?"

"A long time. Hector's been struggling to hang on ever since RKO went under. It's been one bad job after another for him ever since."

"I knew a Hector who worked for RKO," I said, playing it casual. "He was a gaffer."

"Different guy," Seitz said. "This Hector was an electrician."

A gaffer was an electrician, but I didn't point that out. Nothing like pedantry for spoiling a budding friendship. And I was feeling very friendly toward Seitz. Especially after he'd told me Hector's last name—Olenik—and the address of the apartment in Santa Monica where he and his wife Joy were staying.

10.

I was hoping Joy would answer the door, disguised as a USO hostess, perhaps, but Hector did. He was a one-eyebrow type dressed in an undershirt and black trousers. Someone had punched him in

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the left eye recently. A day or so earlier, judging by the color of the shiner, which was purple with yellow undertones.

I didn't expect him to place me, but he did. He might have spotted me back at Union Station. Or maybe he recognized the scent I was wearing, burning ranch house. He tried to shut the door, but I was on my way in by then. I showed him my gun and asked to see his.

"I don't have one," he said, with what sounded like sincere regret.

"You had one last night," I pointed out.

Then Joy was with us, moving with the same nervous grace she'd displayed at the station. She was more fashionably dressed today, in Capri pants and a white top. Like her husband's undershirt, her blouse was sleeveless, but it had a straight neckline, more's the pity.

"He's telling the truth," she said, stepping between Hector and my gun. "He threw his in the bay last night."

"Sit down, then," I said. "Hands on your knees."

They chose a dingy sofa against one dingy wall. When they sat, their shoulders came together, either from affectionate habit or worn cushions.

"I'd like to know why you shot at me," I said. "But save that till the end. Start with what this was all about."

"Like we know," Hector said. He was sullen and getting worse by the minute.

Joy said, "We really don't know. Not anymore. Honest, mister. He wouldn't explain about the fire."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Don't tell him," Hector said.

She looked like she might honor and obey that, so I said, "It was Larry Nesbitt, right?"

"How did you know?"

I'd guessed it because the setup at the station had to be the work of someone who knew me, and neither of the Olenik twins did. That suggested Nesbitt, a guy I'd worked with some months earlier. Plus, like Paddy, I was still smelling a publicity play. So had Joy, once.

"We thought it was all for publicity. That's what he told us when the deal first came up. Hector met him a few weeks ago when he got a little fill-in work at United Artists. Nesbitt knew we wanted to get out, Hector and me, that we'd had enough of this town. He called a couple of days ago to say he had a way for us to make a little traveling money. He had this old movie coming in, *The Greatest Story Ever Told.* We were supposed to steal it and ransom it. There'd be a lot of free publicity for the remake, and we could keep the ransom money. That's how we'd get home."

She had a little girl's voice, which might have been the reason she hadn't made it in pictures, those voices going badly with brunettes standing five eight. The voice was almost certainly the reason I asked, "Where's home?"

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"Michigan," she said. "Grand Rapids. That's home for me. That's where we're going. Where we thought we were going."

Until I showed up. "All three of you going east? Hector here had an accomplice at the station. And a lookout last night."

"That was a good friend of ours," Joy said. "He helped Hector at the station as a favor. But he wasn't there last night. It was Mr. Nesbitt's idea to say he was. We can't tell you his name."

I let it go for the moment. "So Nesbitt planned everything, even told you what to wear to distract me."

"Yes," Joy said. "He said you wouldn't be able to resist trying to help me." She leaned a little heavily on the last two words, but I forgave her for it.

"And he told you where to show up to snatch the film."

That one was for Hector, who reluctantly said, "Yes." As he said it, he reached up and touched his purple eye.

Joy explained. "He punched Hector for hitting him too hard."

"Like I know how to pistol-whip people," Hector muttered.

"When was this?"

"The night of the robbery," Joy said. "Nesbitt came by here to say the plan had changed. We were supposed to burn the film."

"In a ranch house you couldn't unload, which was mortgaged to the rafters but insured the same way?" I asked. "How much did Nesbitt know about you two? Or how much am I supposed to believe he knew?"

"Burning the house was my idea," Hector admitted in his grudging way. "Nesbitt wanted us to burn a stolen car, but what do I know about stealing cars? This way we got rid of the house and got the ransom money. Nesbitt promised he'd pass it over later. I wasn't worried about the fire. I knew the fire tower on the ridge would call it in before it could spread."

"Whose idea was it to shoot at me?"

"Nesbitt's. He said I should throw a couple of shots your way, light the fire, and run."

"Why did he want the movie burned?"

Joy took over again. "That's the part he wouldn't explain. He said he didn't have to explain, that we were in too deep to ask any questions."

I wasn't, so I'd just have to ask the man myself. That left the problem of what to do with Hector and Joy. I was still kicking it around when Joy said, "Do you want it?"

I begged her pardon.

"The movie. *The Greatest Story Ever Told.* Do you want it?"

11.

"I just saw what's left of *The Greatest Story Ever Told,*" I said. "I clean better-looking stuff out of my pipe."

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Hector shook his head. "What you saw at the house were cans of old newsreels. I picked them up at a secondhand store in Pasadena."

Joy was nodding. "The movie's in there." She pointed to a beat-up cabinet I'd pegged as their television set. "We never even opened the cases."

I investigated and found the two octagonal carrying cases I'd briefly glimpsed through the door of the baggage car. I pulled one out and told Hector to open it. While he was at it, I addressed his wife.

"Figuring on an extra payday?"

"What?" she asked. Then she blushed. "No. Nothing like that. We just couldn't bring ourselves to burn it. I couldn't."

I believed her, and not just because she sounded like early Peggy Ann Garner. I thought I'd guessed her true motivation. "You couldn't burn it because it's a life of Christ."

"No," she said again. "I've never been very religious." She gave me an up-from-under look and asked, "Have you ever seen a movie called *Night Storm?*"

I said I'd missed that one.

"It was a Richard Conti picture. Nineteen fifty-two. I'm in it. In one scene of it. Mr. Conti tries to pick me up in a bar. It's my only movie."

"So?"

"So I'd hate like hell for every print of *Night Storm* to be lost. There'd be no record then that I'd ever been out here. No record that I'd ever been on Earth."

She pointed to the silver can Hector had extracted from the case. "That's the last print of *The Greatest Story Ever Told.* Mr. Nesbitt said so. It might be the only picture some girl from nineteen nineteen ever got to be in, the only record she was ever here. I couldn't let it be burned. We were going to take it with us, arrange for it to be 'discovered' in a few years. Now you can take it."

Her husband was holding the can out to me. From where I stood, I could read "Excelsior Productions" on its paper label. "Open it," I said.

It took some prying, but Hector got it done. The room immediately filled with a chemical smell that reminded me a little of some of the explosives I'd encountered in the field artillery. The can contained a film reel, but the reel was swimming in a rusty brown goo. Unstable, Barney had called the old nitrate stock, and he hadn't exaggerated. Joy's lost starlet of 1919 was out of luck. That goo was all that remained of *The Greatest Story Ever Told.*

Right away I saw how it had all come to pass. The Russians had slipped the New York museum and United Artists a worthless print. Nesbitt's museum buddy had discovered the truth and informed Nesbitt, who had worked out a scheme to destroy the film and save both their jobs. That's why he hadn't had any press at the station. He hadn't wanted anyone to examine those cans.

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Now he'd get more free publicity than he would have if the film had been intact. All at the expense of Hollywood Security.

"Close it up," I said. "Carefully. And put it back in the case. Then both cases and we three go down to my car."

I'd intended Joy to do half the lugging, but Hector gallantly carried the whole load. I unlocked my trunk for him, slipping out the leather satchel I'd stashed there the night before, the one containing the ransom money. I'd put my gun away, so as not to attract the attention of passersby, but what I did next attracted plenty, which was to knock Hector down. Being a nice guy, I hit him in his right eye, the good one. "That's for the ricochet," I said.

Then I dumped half the satchel's contents, five thousand dollars, next to him on the sidewalk. I knew Paddy would hide me for it, but I did it anyway.

"You'll have to make Grand Rapids on that," I told Joy. "Good luck. I'll watch the late-show listings for *Night Storm.*"

12.

Nesbitt's little press conference was underway when Paddy and I arrived, which was just how we'd timed it. The event had drawn representatives from the local dailies and even a television film crew, which cheered Paddy somewhat. My boss had been displeased, as I'd predicted, when I'd handed him only five thousand tax-free dollars to lock away in his office safe.

Nesbitt's mood seemed to be extreme grief, which was impressive, grief being a hard one to pull off with wavy hair. He must have finished listing Hollywood Security's many failings, because the words that caught in his throat as we marched in were part of a lament for Thomas Ince's lost masterpiece.

"Good news," Paddy boomed, ostensibly addressing Nesbitt but actually playing to the camera and its attendant microphone. "Hollywood Security, Incorporated, managed to carry out the exchange only slightly behind schedule. Here it is, *The Greatest Story Ever Told,* all twelve reels of it, just as it was purchased from our friends the Russians with no less than one hundred thousand dollars of the studio's money. I took the liberty of phoning ahead so a vintage projector could be set up in one of your screening rooms. I'm sure you won't begrudge these ladies and gentlemen of the press a brief glimpse of this work of art."

There was a smattering of applause, started by the studio employees there to lend Nesbitt moral support. They'd be supporting him literally before long, if his bloodless face was anything to go by.

Paddy acknowledged the hand, turned to leave, and then turned back. At the same time, he slipped an envelope from his breast pocket and winged it toward the podium. "Our bill," he said, and winked a wink I hadn't seen in months. ●

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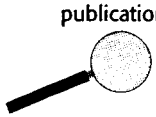

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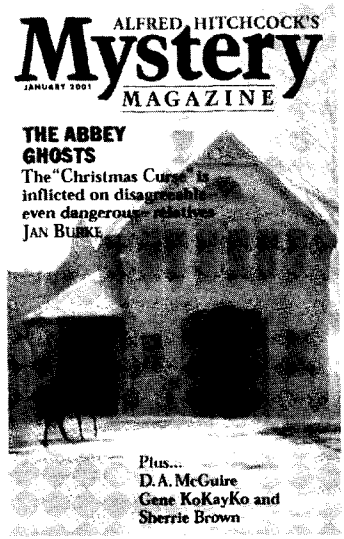

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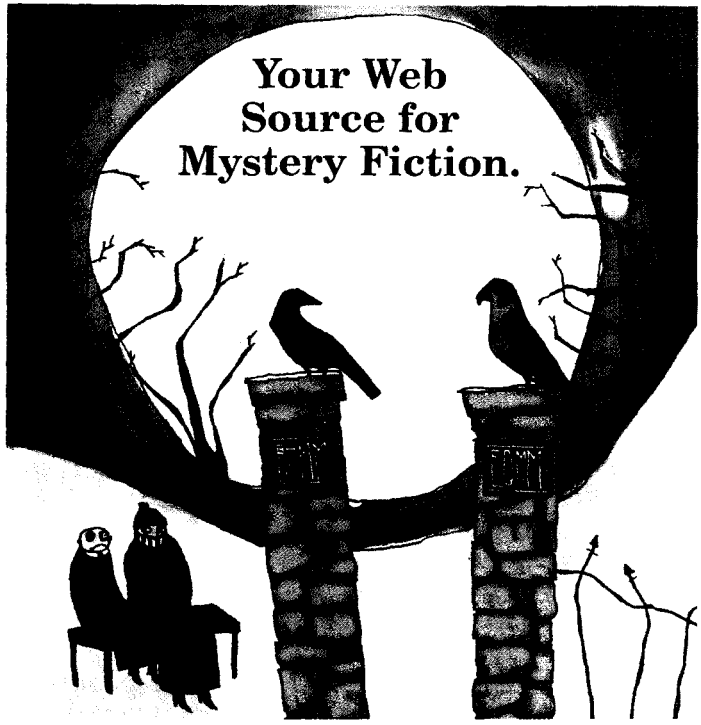

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